2020

Greenbean Comics: An Independent Study!!!

Samantha Green
The College of Wooster, sgreen21@wooster.edu

The College of Wooster

GREENBEAN COMICS:
An Independent Study!!!

by
Samantha Green

Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements of Independent Study
English 451-452

Supervised by
Christopher Kang
Department of English

March 25, 2020

Contents

I Acknowledge You!

This project would not have been possible without the direction of my advisor, Christopher Kang. It probably all started when he lent me his copy of *Free Play*. Thank you, Professor Kang, for exposing me to so many life-changing ideas, for always supporting me, and for helping me find my way to something I care so deeply about.

I love you: Laney, Lauren, Arden, Sarah & Momo, Lillie, Andrea, Eleanor, Ingrid, Sharah, Nat, Jules, Hayley & Jake, Luke & Hannah, Gracie & Annie.

A special thank you to my improv team, Don't Throw Shoes—you make me laugh 'til I feel clean! Love to Elyse, Henry, Charlie, Ivo, Patrick, Zoie, and Shane. Each and every one of us knows that we're the very best!

Thanks so much to John Porcellino for taking the time to have such a meaningful conversation with me.

Thank you Mom, thank you Mom, thank you Mom.
Thank you Dad, thank you Dad, thank you Dad.
I hardly deserve everything you two have done for me. I love you a million!

Lots of the art supplies I've used this year come from All Media Art Supply in Kent, Ohio. Check them out!

Thank you to all the baristas and dining staff who have fueled me through it all!

NO thank you's whatsoever to COVID-19.

And lastly, thank…… YOU!

Introduction: Some Lessons in Creativity and Play

I find it hard to start introducing my Independent Study, because I love it so deeply and there are a million things I want to tell you. But let me just start somewhere and tell you this: this project feels like coming home. I have returned to a practice of comic-making, world-building and playing that I have loved since childhood, one that rests so deeply at my core, and I have recommitted to it in a way that fulfills me. I've made a collection of comics about my relationship with anxiety and depression, daily life, and the misadventures of funny-looking monsters (I'll describe my project in more detail shortly). Making comics for my Independent Study has led me to a year-long relationship with creativity, spontaneity and play, tools which can heal us, bring us joy, and help us connect with others. It is my intention with these comics to play, to embrace my own creative spirit which helps me live a healthier, happier life, and to speak my truths in a way that makes my readers laugh and know they're not alone. I'd like to begin by acknowledging how massive this critical introduction is! The ideas that follow are just too important to me to be left out or diluted, so let's walk through them together, one piece at a time. I find it useful to begin with a discussion of my very early experience with this Independent Study, following a more in-depth introduction to my comics.

My early process lacked a lot of clarity as I tried to skirt around doing what I *knew* I wanted to do. The mental blocks against doing this creative project were strong: I felt like, somehow, I had to do something "more important," or I felt some cosmic obligation to write about the bigger questions of why

storytelling is an important sociopolitical tool, and why we need diverse storytelling in our lives. Those are all excellent questions! They're questions that still need exploring, to be sure. At the beginning of this year, I felt so strongly that those were the questions I had to explore, precisely because they were important. My previous studies also seemed to point me in this direction; things like following the nonprofit 826Chicago, which offers creative writing tutoring to Chicago public school kids, visiting the People Poetry Slam in Cleveland Heights, and studying Maori literary publications while in New Zealand all made me think more about the role storytelling plays in helping us understand our world, express ourselves, and share our truths with others.

Clearly, I had lots of inspiration pointing me towards these questions that felt so important. But here's the kicker—they also just *sounded* important. More important than *making a comic*. So I started drafting together a lot of good but lofty ideas. I wanted to make a "Graphic Thesis on the Urgency of Diverse Storytelling." What a title! I wanted to make a zine filled with writing from guest submitters, critical essays on storytelling, I wanted to host open mics and writing workshops… There was a lot of potential work I was putting on my plate, and I initially struggled a lot to put any real footing to any of these ideas, because they felt groundless. There was my major problem: I had ideas I knew or assumed I cared about, but no way to ground them. Yet I still felt the pull that these questions about things bigger than myself were what I had to write about, because to do otherwise would be a selfish waste of time.

That's not to say that a project like I had initially imagined wouldn't be fruitful. The opposite is true! Yet I very clearly was trying to force myself to do something that felt like what I ought to do. However, I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by support from my advisor and friends who encouraged me to lean into what I *really wanted* to do. My friend Jules Davis says this in their 2019 Independent Study, *Dancing With Wooster*: "At times, I feel anxious about being an artist amidst so many artists. When this happens, I remind myself that there is room in the world for all the artwork in the world" (Davis 5). I have heard Jules' voice in my head so many times this year telling me that *there is room* for me to make comics, even on the days where it doesn't feel "important" enough, and it was once I embraced this that my project started to take a clear shape and come to life. At this point, I was doodling characters and drafting together ideas for my comics, and the relationship I had with planning my project instantly started to change. I was starting small and turning inwards, making little doodles without worrying about what the "bigger questions" were, and this freed me up a lot. It took me a while to even get to this point; I remember coming into my advising meetings with ideas about "making comics about love, friendship and sense of place." I know what I wanted the *themes* of my comics to be, and yet I had no ideas for *pages, characters, or story*. This made it hard to generate any content, because I was trying to force meaning into the comics, rather than let meaning arise from them! My relationship with the practice of making comics changed completely when I embraced putting characters and stories over themes, making things about myself and my own truths, and making things spontaneously. And so

here I am! After some struggling, some exploring, and some free playing, I have arrived back home at a place that matters immensely to me. It's a place where I make characters, express myself, and let my imagination take me somewhere magical. I feel incredibly proud of and fulfilled by this project, and I know that I have begun something that will last the rest of my life.

My essay from here will walk through my comics, their content, my creative process, and how this project has helped me heal and understand my mental health. All of these ideas will be framed by discussions about my three major influences:

- ♥ Stephen Nachmanovitch's book *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* has greatly influenced my creative process—and, consequently, my approach to life—through its ideas about play and spontaneity.
- ♥ From comic artist Lynda Barry I have learned about comics as an example of free play, as well as the importance of aliveness in images.
- ♥ From John Porcellino, creator of *King-Cat Comics and Stories*, I have picked up insight about comics as a particular way of seeing the world, the link between comics and mindfulness, and comic-making as a valuable tool for human connection.

Following a discussion of these influences, I'll tackle the bigger, more mysterious idea that comics are rooted in something inherently, anciently human, which could be a major answer to why they matter so much to me and resonate so well with others.

Before I go any further, I'm going to introduce Stephen Nachmanovitch's book, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*, because it has been the touchstone inspiration behind my creative process in this project and the ideas I discuss in this essay. I began reading Nachmanovitch before my comics took shape at all, and it is the ideas learned from his book that make the comics you see here exist as they do. That said, I'll introduce his basic concept of free play here, returning to his text often as I discuss my other inspirations, to reflect how Nachmanovitch's ideas have inspired my experience with other texts.

Free Play is a book that has rocked my entire world. A sort of extended meditation on the life-giving force of creativity and art, Nachmanovitch riffs off of philosophies from his own life, mythologies, and spiritualities from all over the world to drive home a crucial and compassionate point: that creativity is a powerful tool which can seriously improve our approach to life, and it is something which we can all wield. This is made possible through free play, which Nachmanovitch categorizes in many ways, but I find a useful summary in his chapter "Mind at Play," where he introduces the concepts of galumphing and play as its own destination. Let's take some time to unpack these two concepts so I can give you the fullest sense of free play as I have come to understand it; this will help me explain best how it has inspired my comics.

First, let's explore galumphing, a concept as delightful as the word itself. Nachmanovitch defines it as "the seemingly useless elaboration and ornamentation of activity." It is what happens "when we hop instead of walk, when we take the scenic route instead of the efficient one…" and it is why wild

chimps wrestle each other, why my family's 8-month-old black lab, Annie, likes to gently hold my hand in her mouth and lead me around the room like she's trying to show me something, and why toddlers bounce up and down for no reason when they're excited (Nachmanovitch 44). It's subtle, too, like when a student spins their pen around in class or an office worker crumples up a paper and makes a basket in the trashcan. Everybody galumphs at some point or another; it comes from different places, like boredom or joy or curiosity, but it all leads to the same place of play. Here are some examples of intentional galumphing I've done since reading Nachmanovitch, recorded sometime in September:

> *After I finish a run at a public park, I look over my shoulder to make sure no one's around, and then I skip instead of walk. I fling my arms around and make up a song, singing it loud. I wonder if I could get to a point where I don't think about who's looking.*
>
> *After a day of feeling sad and detached, I go home, turn on some music, and dance in the kitchen like I'm debuting a modern dance piece. I feel feelings come out of each movement, dripping out my fingertips.*
>
> *At improv practice, my friends and I abandon structure and, without discussing anything, start a game of hide-and-seek through an academic building, decide the floor is lava, then run across*

> *campus to the library, where we sit at a secluded table and do scenes as silently as we can. We enter a space of quiet, seriousness, and stress and transform it for twenty minutes into a playground, and it makes me laugh from deep inside 'til it hurts my gut.*

To galumph is to get back to something true and unfiltered, something we know to do as children without anyone needing to instruct us. Nachmanovitch calls this our "original nature," an idea I'll return to at the end of this essay, and it is what compels us to explore, play, move and vocalize to make some connection between our minds and the world around us (Nachmanovitch 25).

The second piece of Nachmanovitch's free play is the emphasis on process over product or result. When we galumph, we don't do so to reach any goal; we do it because the act itself is the goal:

> "As play, the act is its own destination… [it] is intrinsically satisfying. In spontaneity, all these experiences are their own rewards and are blocked when we perform for reward or punishment, profit or less… Play is without 'why.' It is self-existent… Play is done that it is done" (45).

Play is done that it is done! I translate his delightfully confusing phrase this way: we play so that we can feel good, sit back and think, *Ahh, yes, good—I played!* And once we play, no matter if anything is produced or learned, it's *done*—it's not conditional or dependent on anything. This is such a critical realization when making any sort of art: that we are not required to experience, feel, produce, or learn any one thing when we sit down to create. Because, if we treat our moments

of creative practice like free play—like galumphing, which is self-existent—then we know that the only requirement is to play at all. I've been able to put this into practice both inside and outside of my Independent Study; in a class I'm currently enrolled in, called Materiality and the Spirit, my peers and I spend our days sitting on blankets and sharing craft supplies like crayons and Play-Doh, talking through readings on materiality while we work mindlessly with our hands, scribbling or molding without concern for *what exactly* we're making or if it looks good. I've also had days while working on this project where, for outside emotional reasons, I have felt like total garbage and sat down to make comics, anyways. Sometimes on these bad days I can make comics I like, but sometimes—lots of times—I feel terrible about what I'm making. But I make them anyways. I put ink to paper and draw funny creatures: I play. Goal achieved! Allowing ourselves to define our creative work this way allows us to have more grace on the days that feel bad, because we are not defining our creativity on what we create, but instead on the act of *doing it*. This approach has helped me value my work in new, healthier ways which have made me produce more. It's an irony of the best kind: by not worrying so much about what I produce, it frees me up to play around, which gives me more momentum, which makes me… *produce more!* Free play is a tool, I believe, which can totally alter our relationship with creativity, forming it into the friend it is meant to be.

The rest of Nachmanovitch's book takes this core definition of free play and digs deeper into several concepts I've connected deeply to. These include but are not limited to ideas like leaning into our "original nature," surrendering to

uncertainty, how the results of our play can help us tap into something bigger than ourselves, and how creativity can give us healthier approaches to life. I will return to Nachmanovitch's ideas in conversation with my other influences, and my own experiences treating comic-making as free play. *Free Play* is what initially helped the comics you see here take their shape; that being said, I happily turn now to introducing my creative work.

Greenbean Comics is a series of minicomics, which I intend to continue producing as self-published zines. The body of work I have turned in is a cumulative collection of all the comics I have made since September. They feature a recurring cast of myself and major characters who reflect pieces of my brain (and are all pleased to meet you): there's Bee (the voice of reason), Lusa (depression), Fuzzball (anxiety), Phoney Baloney (imposter syndrome), and Flowerhead (romantic longing). In slice-of-life strips, I engage with these characters and their tendency to either build up or destroy my self-esteem as they accompany me in daily scenes. Some episodic stories develop, including *Flowerhead Apocalypse*, in which Flowerhead becomes a zombie and tries to eat my heart, and *Welcome to Creature City*, Phoney Baloney's

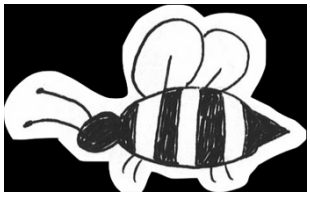


Figure 5 BEE

Figure 4 LUSA

Figure 2 PHONEY BALONEY

Figure 3 FUZZBALL

Figure 1 FLOWERHEAD

tragic backstory set in a city full of creatures who eat candy and scream. I initially set out to complete the entire story arc of *Flowerhead Apocalypse* for my Independent Study, the storyboard coming in at about 50 pages, but gradually I abandoned that idea in favor of creating comics and stories as new ideas came to me. This turned out to be the most productive method, as it gave me the freedom to lean into ideas as they came, and to work on them when I felt the most energy for them. Giving myself this freedom was learned directly from Nachmanovitch, who says this: "If you find your practice boring, don't run away from it, but don't tolerate it either. Transform it into something that suits you" (Nachmanovitch 68). This method gave me significant momentum while I worked; when I felt my energy towards *Flowerhead Apocalypse* start to waver, for example, I worked towards a natural pausing point in the story—Lusa melting and taking over the panels in total darkness—and let it finish, leaving the rest of the story for another time, whether that be in a few months or a year. Practicing comic-making like this—starting multiple story threads and letting them live until I need to shelve them away for a while—has allowed me to maintain creative momentum, build up a world of characters and stories, and use my comic-making most honestly as a space for self-expression and emotional processing. By allowing myself to pick up and set down storylines, I have also created an effective buffer between myself and creative blocks, which I'll discuss as I walk more in depth through my process.

My process for making each comic rides somewhere nicely between a place of spontaneity and planning. Each comic starts somewhere in my head,

either in the shower, while I'm walking to class and listening to punk rock, or especially while I'm running. I record the image in my messy sketchbook and then draft the comic by drawing quick sketches of each panel and writing a script. After I make the draft, I draw in the panels on a sheet of 8.5' x 11" cardstock. Using the draft and script, I draw the final comic with a .5 black pen (usually a G2 Pilot or MUJI pen). I draw with pen first because it's faster, it's a method that's truest to the way I already draw in my sketchbooks, and especially because it makes me embrace mistakes. Without the buffer of a sketch, if I make a mistake in pen, I have no choice but to either live with it, or find a way around it. This might look like covering the accident with something drawn in all black, coloring in the space, or just correcting it and leaving the mark there. As I'll explain later, this idea of embracing mistakes resonates strongly in the work of artist Lynda Barry, and in the spirit of punk. It also comes from the Japanese principle of *wabi-sabi,* which finds beauty in the "irregular," or imperfections like chips in pottery or mistakes in paintings; it is a way of "[making] without pretension" (Yanagi 123). By embracing mistakes in this way, it has made me less afraid to make them and, ironically, it has also made me less prone to them. Diving in and starting with pen makes me put a degree of trust in myself, and this somehow makes my hand more accurate. I wonder what my life would start to look like if I put this same trust in myself when applying for jobs, engaging with the people around me, asking people out on dates?

At some point in making these comics, I hit a creative stride that turned into an effective routine; this stride was strongest over winter break, when I spent my days building blanket forts to make comics in and going to local coffee shops (my favorite being Rising Star on 29th Street in Cleveland), special places which made me feel motivated because of the lively energy they carried. The routine looked like this: at night, I sketched drafts and drew in the panels of whatever comic I would make the next day, and the next day I would head to get coffee and work on those final pages. During the day I would inevitably get new ideas while I drew the final comics, so I would take notes and draw concept sketches as ideas came to me. Once night rolled around again, I'd have new ideas to make more drafts of; the act of moving my hand and drawing throughout the day gave me the necessary momentum to generate new ideas.

Figure 7 A blanket fort where I made lots of comics in January.

Figure 6 Rising Star Coffee Roasters, 29th Street in Cleveland.

The idea behind this cycle comes from an idea I picked up years ago in Haruki Murakami's book *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*.

Murakami gives handfuls of advice on how to maintain momentum and joy both as a writer and a long-distance runner. In the first chapter, he speaks on the importance of working—either at the desk or on the track—until the point where you feel like you could *keep going*, and then stop. The point of this, Murakami says, is to prevent burnout, and to keep us coming back to our practice the next day, precisely because we remember that good feeling—an "exhilaration"—of knowing what to do. By cutting ourselves off from the practice right when it feels the best, we remember that it *makes us feel good*, so we keep coming back (Murakami 5).

From Murakami's book I learned the importance of strategizing ways to keep myself coming back to the drawing table. Incorporating this sort of routine and philosophy into my creative process, alongside ideas of free play, has helped immensely in keeping me committed to and excited about my work. To keep discussing how my comic-making process has developed and how I've started to think about what feels so powerful about making them, I turn to my next major influence: Lynda Barry.

Lynda Barry is a Wisconsin-based comic artist, writer, teacher, and recent MacArthur Genius Grant recipient who blows my mind constantly. Truth be told, I have almost no idea where to start when talking critically about Lynda Barry, because her work inspires me in colorful ways that don't want to fit inside Times New Roman 12-point font on a Word document. Yet I will try! Pulling inspiration here from three of her books—*Making Comics* (2019), *What It Is* (2008), and *Picture This* (2010)— I will discuss how Barry's ideas about drawing connect to

ideas of free play and our "original nature," the emotional importance of creativity, and how her work has inspired me to play more and find characters who feel alive (something which has brought me a lot of joy).

Reading Lynda Barry for the first time is overwhelming because you're not sure what to look at. Her texts are visually stunning yet busy, filled with marginalia and glitter and colors and collage. How do you know where to go? Which words should you read first? Which words are you even *supposed* to read, and which are meant to be part of the background? How long are you supposed to look at a page until you get all of its contents? Barry's visual genius is so loudly obvious that it washes over you—you're not sure exactly how to read her stuff.

That is… until you realize that she is practicing what she preaches! Barry believes in play through drawing, and this resonates visually in her 2008 book, *What It Is.* This text focuses on the magical qualities of images, drawing and creating things by hand which feel alive. She writes about the healing properties that drawing has for kids, how that magic gets lost, and how we can find it again. She connects drawing to a special kind of thinking and processing, and ultimately argues that an image, drawn by us or a child or anyone, is "the formless thing which gives things form," or some magical, mysterious thing which rises out of us and helps us explain and understand the world around us (Barry, *What It Is* 8). Barry's exploration of how images illuminate our world will be especially useful when we reach my conclusion, where I consider what makes comics and drawing specifically so important for human expression.

What It Is moves between alternating sections of autobiographical comics from Barry's childhood, "comic essays" about images and drawing, and several sections of collaged pages containing the key questions Barry explores in the book. Pages contain details like cut-out bits from vintage books about trains, old photographs, mysterious phrases like "DON'T DO THIS UNLESS YOU ARE PREPARED TO BE SCARED" and "FIND ME BY NOT LOOKING," random birds and bits of fabric, sprawling colors, and blobs of glitter (48-49). These pages are a feast for the eyes, but whether or not it feels like a feast or torture depends on how you allow yourself to read it. The answer of how to read them is all over Barry's entire work, but it is even on these pages themselves. The answer shows up in phrases like "FOLLOW A WANDERING MIND... it takes practice to find THE PULL TOY THAT PULLS YOU" or "TO FOLLOW A WANDERING MIND means HAVING to get lost. CAN YOU STAND BEING LOST?" (48-49). There is nothing on these pages for us to read, per say. There are only things to explore; Barry visually encourages us to let our eyes—and therefore our minds—wander, and the lack of structure on these thickly collaged pages points us towards being lost, which Barry doesn't see as a bad thing. We take in the details and the collage, following them around in no particular order, to simply see what is there. If we're patient enough and look long enough, answers or a certain sort start to arise from these collages. This is exactly what Barry wants! She wants us to "GO THROUGH TOWN," or the page and its images, and "follow it" to wherever it leads our minds (48). She wants us to let our brains spin.

The way these collaged pages are arranged is a physical embodiment of that sort of spinning—of a wandering mind at play, as Nachmanovitch would say. When we first discover a new idea or formulate a new question, our minds spin off in a million different directions as we remember things related to those questions. This spinning is essential to the process of asking and then answering questions, and all Barry is doing in these seemingly dense pages is giving physical life to this process of brain-spinning. She is playing with these questions, and through these pages, she extends the invitation to play to us! The pages are full of hidden gems, and the time it takes to look at them and process their images is time to *play*, with no pressure involved. To scan a colorful page for little nuggets, to explore the space for bits Barry has left behind for us. She encourages us to pause our normal process of reading, the constant flow to gain information, and to meditate on one piece, to dive into and explore its contents, to galumph and dart our eyes back and forth much like we would have in an *I Spy* book. Reading Barry is designed to be pure play; opening myself to that possibility made putting her ideas into practice much easier for me in my comics.

The type of play Barry encourages us to do as readers is very similar to what she encourages us to do as creators; she wants us to discover what is waiting for us in the page. This has been a huge inspiration for me, and has led me to new discoveries about characters and stories. Barry discusses this idea about waiting through a game of her own invention which she mentions throughout her work: *the staring game.* She describes it in *What It Is*:

> WHEN I WAS little, I PLAYED A certain staring game THAT seemed TO HAVE INVENTED itself. I WOULD HOLD MYSELF AS STILL as I COULD and MAKE MY EYES like A TOY'S eyes THAT DON'T move – and I WOULD WAIT. I WOULD wait FOR THE other THINGS in the room to FORGET ABOUT ME and BEGIN TO MOVE… I BELIEVED there WAS another WORLD that WOULD SHOW itself TO ME in the SMALLEST ways. THE gray KITTEN IN THE picture BY my bed WOULD ACCIDENTALLY BLINK HIS EYES. The GIRL in THE PICTURE would breathe… I DIDN'T KNOW there WERE different KINDS OF ALIVENESS, AND two worlds CONTAINED by EACH other (9-11).

To Barry, the staring game is all about having the patience to wait for images to come alive and show us something. When we encounter images and story worlds, something bizarre starts to happen if we stay there long enough. Something starts to move—not literally, but we somehow *feel* it—and we start to gain an awareness of the image we're looking at as *another world*. We begin to feel as if we're looking through a window, peering *into* someplace. The feeling is tangential, I'm sure, to getting lost in a good book or leaving a movie theatre feeling like reality is a little fuzzy. I have found myself playing the staring game when drawing my comics, especially when creating the world of *Creature City*. I remember drawing Phoney Baloney's apartment and getting lost in the details, like the contents of his closet or all his motivational posters, and I found myself

Figure 8 Some details from Phoney Baloney's apartment.

starting to imagine a three-dimensional view of the apartment in my head. The longer I drew and stared at the world I was building, the more of a shape it started to take, and the more tangible and real it felt—as if the panel were a window. To experience an image coming to life like this *while I draw it* is so satisfying, and this, I think, is part of the magic of drawing comics: getting to watch something come alive in real time, and doing it by my own hand.

I have felt this magic the most when making new characters or, as Lynda Barry would describe it, waiting for them to *show up.* Since the characters in my comics are reflective of myself and my mind, I have developed deeply personal connections with them, and yet they have started to gain lives and minds of their own. Barry describes how this happened to her with two of her most popular characters, Marlys and Arna, and how she "DIDN'T KNOW THEY WERE COMING. AND WHEN THEY FIRST SHOWED UP THEY DIDN'T STAND OUT" (Barry, *Picture This* 116). This was definitely the case for me when I spent time in my sketchbook, doodling until characters started to reappear. *Creature City* came from this spontaneous place, as shown in Figure 9. I drew this page in class one day, drawing little creatures to fill up the space. I kept moving, not planning any creature, until I drew one with a top hat and thought, "He looks like

the mayor of something." I gave him a sash. This led to me turning the doodle into a parade of creatures from a place called Creature City, and for no good

Figure 9 The sketchbook page that inspired Creature City!

reason I drew Phoney Baloney running away from them. That's when the idea for *Welcome to Creature City* as Phoney Baloney's backstory clicked into place! My favorite characters have come from moments of play, when I've let myself create with no plan, trusting that ideas or certainty would come to me if they wanted to. Barry sums it up nicely in her most recent book, *Making Comics*, on a page titled "Why Monsters?"

> If you open the way for them MONSTERS WILL SURPRISE YOU AND THIS IS A REASON TO DRAW THEM. ONE OF THE hardest THINGS

> TO REMEMBER IS TO KEEP CERTAIN DOORS OPEN TO UNKNOWNS (Barry, *Making Comics* 66).

Taking inspiration from Barry, spontaneously drawing monsters with no regard for what they look like or why they're there has led me to really gratifying moments of creativity, as I've let myself flow and watch them come to life *before my eyes.*

Lynda Barry touches on this feeling in *What It Is*, describing what happens when kids draw:

> THEY MAKE SOUND EFFECTS OR START TALKING OUT A STORY THAT SEEMS TO BE HAPPENING LIVE, AS THEY DRAW. THERE IS A CHANGE OF PLACE AND TIME. ANOTHER WORLD CONTAINED BY THIS ONE. THEY SEEM TO BE BOTH IN IT AND WATCHING IT (Barry, *What It Is* 104).

She describes this feeling of falling into another world as a certain "floating feeling" which seems to take us over some boundary between the real and the imaginary, the tangible (our hands, the pen, the paper) and the intangible (the world and ideas that we're drawing) (124). Nachmanovitch calls this "disappearing" and associates it with pure creative flow (Nachmanovitch 51). To Barry, drawing is and always has been a magical mode of transportation, one that helps activate our imaginations, our sense of wonder, and helps get us to a meditative state of mind. I find my way to this feeling every time I sit down to make comics, and it comforts and amazes me every time. Whether I'm at home or at a coffee shop, I sit down with my pens, my paper, a draft of a comic, and music

playing in my headphones. Usually when I begin to draw everything around me feels normal, but after a while, things gradually start to slip into a magical territory. Reality starts to get a little fuzzy, my visual awareness of the room around me fades, and I begin to see whatever I'm drawing in total tunnel vision, like it's the only thing that exists. After a while longer I start to melt into the page, and I start to get so intimately invested in drawing the details of a place like Phoney Baloney's apartment that I start to feel my presence in the image—or the image's presence in me, I suppose. Ivan Brunetti describes it like this in his book *Aesthetics*: "Drawing is the one thing that slows down existence, that burns the world into your brain" (Brunetti n.p.) It's complete focus and creative flow, but because the content I'm working with is focused on bringing some cartoon world to life, this flow feels like blasting away to another world completely. This is where I have the most fun; I get to construct a physical world from the ground up, play architect and build entire city streets, and I get to populate those streets with whoever and whatever comes to me. I remember moments during the process of creating *Creature City* where I'd draw a detail I wasn't expecting to draw at all, and l'd laugh at how silly and fun it was. Here I felt myself embracing Nachmanovitch's free play and spontaneous creation, and Barry's idea of letting the world come to me as I moved my hand. To lean into a creative process like this has been incredibly fruitful, fun, and healing.

One of the most important ideas I've learned from Lynda Barry is the idea of embracing *not knowing*, and letting it guide us rather than terrify and bully us. In *What It Is,* she talks about the "RIDDLE OF WHAT'S MISING" from our

work, of the apparent lack of ideas or the feeling that the well has run dry. The hardest days while working on this project were the ones where I would stare at a blank page or feel like I had "forgotten how to draw," and wonder why I was bothering at all. How do we solve a riddle like this? How do we find the answers that in the moment seem so unfindable? Barry gives us the only answer: "NO ONE [HAS] *ever* SOLVED THE RIDDLE BY THINKING THEIR WAY *out* OF *it*" (Barry, *What It Is* 132). We cannot meet our creative blocks and try to rationalize or reason our way out of them. ("Well, if I write this exact thing in this exact way, it'll solve my block and make me money and then all my problems will be solved…") That kind of thinking is contradictory to the creative process. What do we do instead? Barry frequently illustrates a kind-looking yet mysterious tentacled monster with the words "DON'T KNOW" printed all over its body. This creature guides her hand at the drawing table as she allows herself "TO BE ABLE TO STAND NOT KNOWING *long* ENOUGH *to* LET *something* ALIVE TAKE SHAPE!" (135). That creature, the feeling of not knowing what we're saying or what we're doing, is with all of us. When we let it serve not as a hindrance but a guiding force, we open so many doors for ourselves! I mentioned briefly my experience doing improv comedy, and this is exactly how it works; the best, most enjoyable improv happens when we let our guards down, plan nothing, and let words pour out of our mouths, trusting that we're going to find our way to something concrete. When we create anything and let our minds move without judgment, we make space for "THAT STRANGE FLOATING FEELING" that

Barry believes in: a pure creative flow that gives us a secret world to go into, one where we can spend as much time as we like (135).

Nachmanovitch is a friend of this idea, as well; in a chapter appropriately titled "Surrender," he explains the dangers of letting the fear of creative blocks take over our minds. He reminds us that, when we feel stuck, "Discipline is crucial, but we do not attain it by stiffening up" or by making "an adversary or bogeyman" out of our blocks (Nachmanovitch 141). *A bogeyman!* Lynda Barry's tentacled monster definitely looks like it could be a bogeyman, and yet he's not: he is a guiding force that shows us the multiple ways we *could* go, and all we have to do is pick one option and try it, then if that one doesn't work, step back and try a different one. Nachmanovitch outlines what we can do when we get blocked, things we can do to make friends and not enemies of the block: "meditate, free associate, do automatic writing, talk to yourself and answer yourself. Play *with* the blocks… Relax, surrender to the bafflement… and the solution will come. Persevere gently" (141). *Persevering gently* is important to Barry, as well, who speaks repeatedly about the necessity of staying in motion. In *Picture This*, she describes how, when she reaches a "QUIET PERIOD" of low inspiration when working on her comics, she turns to repetitive doodles like dots, lines, and even what she calls "EYE BALL CHAINS," drawing these things because she "[HAS] TO BE ABLE TO STAND [the quiet period] SOMEHOW AND WAIT" (Barry, *Picture This* 126). Similarly, in *What It Is* she explains how she keeps a blank legal pad by her side when she works, drawing on it when she gets stuck on her main project.

> INSTEAD OF STOPPING TO THINK, I KEEP MY BRUSH IN MOTION BY MOVING IT TO MY NOTE PAD. I DON'T PLAN A PATH FOR MY BRUSH. I JUST MOVE IT UNTIL MY OTHER PAD OF PAPER CALLS ME BACK. IT SEEMS TO WORK (Barry, *What It Is* 190).

Haruki Murakami has a similar belief about staying motion (literally) when he's training for marathons; he never takes two days off in a row, because "muscles are like work animals that are quick on the uptake," and he must stay in motion each day to teach his body what it needs to be prepared for (Murakami 71). I have taken ideas like these to heart by keeping my sketchbook with me at all times, drawing my characters in class, and beginning each comic-drawing session by doodling spontaneously to warm up. Most of the time, it's from this motion that my new ideas come to me. According to both Nachmanovitch and Barry, when we let ourselves surrender to times of uncertainty and work through them by keeping ourselves moving *somehow*, while trusting that certainty will eventually call us back, we create a safeguard against ourselves and creative frustration. When we welcome the *not knowing* into our lives, we give ourselves more space to breathe and keep pressing forward, and that is doing ourselves a huge service.

I could go on talking about Lynda Barry for hundreds of pages, but for your sake and mine, I should move on. As I transition into my last major influence, John Porcellino, I'd like to revisit briefly my discussion about Barry's feeling of creating characters as if they *appear* to us, with lives of their own, and meet us at the page. I want to connect this idea to what it feels like to draw *myself*

in comics and what this does for me mentally, because it will help me bridge together the idea of bringing comics alive and seeing them as a healing practice. I've been straining all year to understand what happens to me when I draw myself as a cartoon character, why it feels so cosmically good, and why I feel such a connection with this character. I think it has to do with this idea of meeting a character on the page (though there is still something unexplainable about it).

Figure 10 Some self-portraits.

When I draw my cartoon self, I am calling upon a certain state of mind that feels completely internal, intimate and meditative, and in tune with whatever I'm feeling. When I'm feeling happy, I can make my cartoon self look ecstatic and jelly-like, hair flying and grinning widely from ear to ear. When I'm feeling depressed, I can make her face droop, give her massive bags under her eyes, and have her floating through some miserable-looking space. I think what I'm getting at here resonates well with one of my very favorite quotes from Nachmanovitch, coming from his chapter called "The Judging Spectre." He says:

> There may also be multiple ghosts of ourselves hanging around, all the people we might have been if the past had taken a different turn; we should have, could have, would have done *x*. We all indulge in this sort of

> self-torture from time to time. What can save us is our knowledge that true creativity arises from *bricolage*, from working with whatever odd assortment of funny-shaped materials we have at hand, including our odd assortment of funny-shaped selves (Nachmanovitch 137).

I, like so many of us, am full of "funny-shaped selves," as the subject matter of my comics reveals. The voices in my head are loud, sometimes nice and sometimes nasty, and the wonderful thing about making these comics has been how adaptable they are. The form allows me to lean into my complex and always shifting emotions and to embrace them all, to give them *all* a voice and a shape so I can understand or process them. Making comics (and creativity on the whole) is a practice that is very compassionate and receptive to whatever I'm feeling, because the pen and the paper will always be ready to work with me and reflect back what I'm feeling. Drawing myself as a cartoon is a way to express how I'm feeling in visual extremes, and because of the state of mind I enter into when I draw—Barry's "certain floating feeling"—it's almost as if I'm floating somewhere in between my body and my mind. It is completely meditative, calming, and therapeutic. My inspiration from Lynda Barry is ongoing, but so far has taught me to joy of making worlds and characters that feel alive and can almost seem to communicate with me; in my case, making comics about my mental health, this has been particularly useful. From Barry I have learned to create lively images and worlds that help me engage with my emotions.

I turn now to my other major influence, John Porcellino, to talk more about this idea of comic-making as a healing practice, as well as a unique way to

connect with others. The discovery that making personal comics is not selfish but actually helps me connect with folks around me on a deeply emotional and healing level was one that I reached largely on my own, by sharing my comics and talking to loved ones about them, but through John Porcellino's work, I saw this discovery reflected back at me. Porcellino has been making his highly influential zine, *King-Cat Comics and Stories*, since 1989, self-publishing his issues and distributing them through his independent distribution service, Spit and a Half. Each issue of *King-Cat* includes comics about Porcellino's daily life, dreams and memories, as well as sections of personal prose, letter exchanges, and a section I love called "King-Cat Top 40," where he lists things he's been liking at the time of writing (like music, books, moments, or his pets). I had the pleasure of speaking with Porcellino on Skype, where we talked about everything from comics as therapy, mental health, to Ohio winters and swamp rock. My discussion about Porcellino will focus on how his work has inspired me to think about the overlap between making comics, mindfulness, and community. I'll draw mostly from our interview, as well as from two of his comic collections published by Drawn & Quarterly: *King-Cat Classix* and *From Lone Mountain.*

Reading Porcellino's comics makes me feel like I'm breathing slower. They are visually simple, almost in complete contrast to Lynda Barry's work, with black lines outlining basic, cartoonish shapes on white paper. Characters have dots for eyes and lines for noses, and city landscapes and nature are marked with a particular cartoonish style, their corners rounded and details few. Not only is this style inviting, but it's minimalist in a way that makes sense for what

Porcellino feels and writes about. Many of his comics, especially in later issues of *King-Cat*, revolve around his connection to and experiences in nature, as well as his connection to daily moments. Many of the comics in *From Lone Mountain* are like this, one of which is titled "Freeman Kane." In this comic, set in Elgin, Illinois in the winter of 2001, cartoon-Porcellino drives across a country road in his car—just a blob with little circles for wheels—until he reaches Freeman Kane for a hike. The comic is twelve pages of quiet, of Porcellino walking through snowy woods, squatting down to look at plants, and breathing in the cold. The comic has very few words; aside from indications of roads he turns onto and music he listens to during the drive, and in one panel, he says, simply, "IT'S BEAUTIFUL." The comic ends with a panel of simply-drawn trees and Porcellino's footprints leading up through the snow (Porcellino, *From Long Mountain* 179-192). The quiet panels in this comic guide us through the image, almost as if we are walking with Porcellino, taking in the quiet woods with him. Porcellino creates a reading experience that encourages us to slow down, to say nothing, and to simply observe what is within the panels—just as, on this actual hike, he observes what is around him.

In another comic, "Trombones No. 1 (Please Read Slowly)," we feel the comic best if we do just that: read slowly. The comic shows Porcellino at work, simply moving things around, writing things down, microwaving his lunch and eating it. The "climax" of the comic happens when he notices a pack of paperclips laying on the table as he eats; he picks it up, reads what it says—"TROMBONES NO. 1"—and sets it back down. The comic ends (35-38). A comic like this seems

to be about nothing; there is no "punchline" which we assume to be part of the formula for a comic, and there appears to be no resolution to these stories. And yet, why should there be? These comics are about small moments in Porcellino's life, and leaving the comics' endings open in unresolved panels showing a simple landscape or a character sitting silently leaves the moment itself open; it's as if Porcellino is intentionally leaving the moment open, inviting us to stay there as long as we like. His comics read as a reflection of a particular mindset of his; we talked in our interview about his experience with Zen Buddhism, how it has helped him gain a sense of "non-discriminatory awareness" of everything in the world around him, letting it all in, and being mindful of his daily life:

> It helped me focus on what I saw I was doing in my life… Zen is a practice that's involved with everyday life. You know, there's nothing special. You don't have to go anywhere special or do anything special. It's the idea that you become aware of what's happening at any given moment, so at some point [everything] just became intertwined together. I don't think of drawing comics or practicing Zen or doing the dishes or driving so much as distinct practices in my life… it's all my life, you know?" (Porcellino).

I thought about this quote exactly on the day I'm writing this (March 8th, 2020), while walking through town and watching the Cuyahoga River. I felt peace for no significant reason, and I thought to myself, *This moment feels so good and it is ordinary. It doesn't have to be special to be special.* The approach to life Porcellino shows in his comics is all about slowing down, taking everything in,

being mindful of the things that strike us, and allowing ourselves to see all that we do as part of a larger whole. I'm reminded of the poems of Yoko Ono which are very mindful in nature. Her book *Grapefruit* contains the following poem, "Let's Piece I," which says: "… let everybody in the city think / of the word 'yes' at the same time / for 30 seconds. Do it often" (Ono). The simple idea of *yes*, conveniently, is part of *Free Play* too, in an exercise Nachmanovitch offers us: "Look at whatever is in front of you and say, 'Yes! Yes! Yes!' to it…" (Nachmanovitch 55). This appears to be exactly what Porcellino does in his comics, and I have found that embracing the ideas of *yes* and *non-discriminatory awareness* have changed the way I experience both my comics and the world around me. Learning how his life philosophies shine through so directly in his comics has inspired me to think more about the ways I integrate both my comics into my life and my life into my comics. I can make loud, dramatic comics about Flowerhead turning into a zombie, but I can also make comics about how good it feels to brush my teeth after a long day. I can start to see my everyday life as a collection of moments, moments that can turn into vivid stories on paper, and I believe that approach can help give us a sense of grounding in life, as well as an endless source of inspiration.

A blurb on the cover flap of *King-Cat Classix* from comic artist Chris Ware says it best: "John Porcellino's comics distill, in just a few lines and words, the feeling of simply being alive." Porcellino's work has inspired me to reassess how I practice *simply being alive* and to look all around me, to take in the physical world in a more mindful way, and to turn it all into comics. We agreed in

our interview that part of what makes comics such a powerful medium is that you can make a comic about *anything*—if you can imagine it, you can make it exist on paper—and a major turning point in my creative process has been leaning into this idea, opening my comics up to be a vessel for not only the things I feel, but the things I do, experience and encounter in real life. They can be a vessel for my own experience of *simply being alive.*

Porcellino's work has been most important to me because of what it has taught me about comic-making as a unique tool for human connection and community-forming. His own experience with comics centers around his work in the minicomic/zine world, one which is rooted in punk and characterized by small communities of folks making work about their lives, sharing and trading, and connecting over their stories. Work like Porcellino's which both embraces the personal and reaches out to others at the same time has inspired me to allow myself to lean into my personal experiences and write about them, and then use them to build emotional connections with those around me. His ideas are very much in conversation with my experience of how comics can heal, both in the practice of making them and sharing them with a community.

Porcellino and I talked for a while about what it was like for him to start making his zines in the early nineties, when only a handful of folks in the country were making the kind of comics he was. He remembered sending *King-Cat* to other artists like Julie Doucet, leaving his zines at record stores and hearing back from other zine-makers, and exchanging letters with readers and artists he had never met, forging friendships over each other's work. This time in his life, he

described, was associated not just with the underground comics and zine scenes, but with punk rock, too. In his early days he left copies of his zines at punk record stores and embraced the punk essence of "raw, unfiltered expression" where "you don't worry about the mistakes… you take pride in the mistakes. You take pride in the humanness of it, and the imperfections of it" (Porcellino). This reminds me of one of my current favorite bands, Frog, (whose music makes me feel alive like punk does) and a track-by-track commentary of their latest album *Count Bateman* done by the songwriter, Dan Bateman, for a blog. While recording the song "Black Friday," his dogs started barking in the room, which he decided to keep in the take—I'm reminded of *wabi-sabi* here—because they barked right as Bateman was singing lyrics *about dogs*. "Happy accidents make a song sometimes," he said ("Track by Track…").

An early comic in *King-Cat Classix* touches on punk's love of "happy accidents;" in it, a young Porcellino directly addresses readers who have complained about his art being "garbage," to which he mentions artists like Gary Panter and Lynda Barry as inspirations and says the following:

> A CRAPPY LINE, SCRATCHED ON PAPER, [IS] INFINITELY MORE 'REALISTIC' THAN THE MOST LABORED RENDERING… WHY BOTHER SPENDING 3 HOURS ON A DRAWING IF THE WORLD COULD END TOMORROW? OR I COULD SPEND TIME WATCHING TV INSTEAD? (Porcellino, *King-Cat Classix* 89-90).

To Porcellino here, what matters about comic and zine-making is not the quality of the thing, but the "raw, unfiltered expression" it facilitates.

The connection to draw here between punk and Porcellino's influence on my work all has to do with community and spirit, I think. Porcellino's words about punk's spirit of embracing imperfection is etched all over the hand-stapled, scribbled look of zines, of the lo-fi, loud and excited energy of garage punk bands, and handmade house show posters. The aesthetic of punk is filled with some magical energy that makes me want to make comics and dance hard, and I think my sudden attachment to it all is closely tied to my admiration of the community forged around things like punk music and comics. Porcellino spoke to me about his growing sense of community with zines in the nineties. He described his experience with comics as "this real small, real intense community of like-minded people" and went on to say:

> You'd send out a zine and write a letter to your friend you'd never met, and tell them what [had] been going on since the previous issue of your magazine or whatever. And they'd send you back their latest thing, and you'd read what they were doing and see how they were growing or changing and their art was evolving and stuff… and it was really special (Porcellino).

You can see this kind of community reflected directly in his work; each issue of *King-Cat* includes sections called *King-Cat Snorenose*, where Porcellino writes about his life at the time of the issue, and *Catcalls*, where he copies down letters he's received from friends and readers. He also frequently makes comics about his loved ones, friends and family and pets, strangers he's met, and experiences he's had with all of them. His zines, like many, are tangible records

of his memories, feelings and relationships; they're little pieces of a life lived, and a community of folks sharing zines like Porcellino's is, I believe, a community of folks sharing their lives, feelings and truths, an openness which is incredibly valuable and encourages genuine connection.

This is, according to Porcellino, is one of the biggest parts of his work: the idea that comics can heal us, not only on an individual level, but on a communal level. Porcellino has made comics about his battles with depression, anxiety, and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and in our interview we talked about how it felt for him to start making work about these highly personal topics:

> I just started talking openly about this stuff and, first of all, it was so liberating to just be honest… not that I was dishonest [before], but I was embarrassed—I was ashamed—of my illness, and I spent a lot of energy trying to keep it [in], and to just go on the book tour and talk to a group of people and just be completely straight-up about what was going on when I was making these comics… it was so freeing, and I found that the more I was able to talk freely about this stuff, the looser the grip it had on my life became. It was a way of standing up to this illness (Porcellino).

He went out to talk about how freeing himself up to talking publicly about these things made his readers, in turn, feel free to open up and connect with him about their own mental illnesses. He talked about going on book tours and being approached by readers who also struggled or knew someone who struggled with OCD, and how he realized the importance of creating spaces for more open conversations about mental health.

> To be able to write openly about your struggles not only is gonna help you in the long run, but it opens up these doors with so many other people, you know? And it helps destigmatize the conversation, and it helps people… even if [it's] nothing but commiserating with someone else who has these kinds of problems… The reason I do this is because I love people, and I wanna share things with people, and I want them to share things with me. You know? I wanna have a connection with people (Porcellino).

I'm lucky to share what I believe is a heightened sense of openness with my friends and loved ones around this issue; the conversation about mental health (especially within my generation, I believe) has definitely opened up, with more folks sharing their struggles and less people feeling alone as a result. That said, like Porcellino, I recognize how impossible it can feel sometimes to talk about my own depression and anxiety, because they are intangible feelings that, sometimes, are damn near impossible to understand or articulate. It's difficult to speak truthfully about what we're feeling when we have a character like Phoney Baloney constantly on our shoulders, yelling lies at us about how we've been faking our struggles all along! This makes me want to bury my feelings, to sit quietly and not bother talking about them, because I know that nothing I say about how I'm feeling is going to make sense or seem real. It can be

Figure 11 How obnoxious!

exhausting to talk about our mental wellbeing, especially when things are hard for us to understand. My point is this: though the conversation around mental health has likely changed from Porcellino's youth to mine, it is still true and will always be true that mental health is something that a lot of us stay quiet about. For fear of judgment from others or fear of judgment from ourselves changes from person to person, but for one reason or another, we still seem to be universally riddled by the mysteries of our own minds and the grief they can cause us.

That's why tangible art like comics can be so useful; it helps to make the intangible tangible and the unseen seen. It helps us take something in our lives that we don't understand, or that hurts us too much to talk about plainly, and allows us to translate it, so to speak, into something we can manage. Turning my mental health into funny monster creatures helps to make the problems I face extremely tangible; I cannot see my depression or my anxiety, but I can see and fully sense characters like Lusa and Fuzzball. I can sit down with them, talk to them, and tell them to go away. To make something so unseen as mental health this tangible helps me to deal with these issues, makes me feel less alone, and makes it easier to share vulnerable issues. This kind of expression allows us to "conceptualize the unknowns of the psyche, to work with forces in us which, if left unconscious, would overwhelm us" (Nachmanovitch 185). Another major inspiration in this regard has been the comics community of Instagram; mental health is a popular topic in Instagram webcomics, as seen in the example of one of my favorite artists, Connie Sun. Sun makes autobiographical comics featuring a wise elephant character walking her through moments of depression, anxiety and

stress. In her comic "A Certain Solace," cartoon Connie stands in the snow with a caption that reads: "END OF A LONG HARD WEEK. PROBABLY FOR EVERYBODY THOUGH," and in the next panel she stands alongside her elephant, with the caption: "UPSIDE: YOU'RE NOT ALONE" (Sun). A comic as simple as this still speaks volumes about how valuable the form is: in these two panels, we see a cartoon version of Connie Sun visibly upset, then comforted by her elephant companion. This elephant, we can only assume, doesn't exist in real life, or at least exists in reality as part of Sun's own inner voice. And yet, in this comic, that inner voice of reason has a tangible shape and is able to physically comfort Sun. Giving comforting thoughts a tangible shape like this, whether it's Sun's elephant or my own Bee, makes them all the easier to internalize and believe. Likewise, making the negative, depressive thoughts tangible makes them easier to understand and work through with the voice-of-reason characters. In my experience, which I can only assume is similar to that of other comic-makers of similar genres, personifying my mental illness through comic-making has been an incredibly useful, therapeutic tool in giving a shape and breath to thoughts which can so often be impossible to see and understand.

It has been also useful, however, in giving myself a necessary critical distance from my thoughts. Lynda Barry says that "WE DON'T CREATE A FANTASY WORLD TO ESCAPE REALITY, WE CREATE IT TO BE ABLE TO STAY," and that we use "IMAGES TO UNDERSTAND WHAT OTHERWISE WOULD BE INTOLERABLE" (Barry, *What It Is* 40). I believe this, and I *also* believe that art can be a helpful *separation* from the intolerable. In

making my own comics, I've found a lot of value in fleshing out my characters and worlds so that they can exist independently of me, in a sense. For example, creating the *Creature City* storyline allowed me to separate Phoney Baloney from the act of constantly bullying me; I found it healthy to engage with his character in a setting all of his own, his home city, and to create a separation from his character and mine created a symbolic separation between me and imposter syndrome. Moreover, while I strongly stand by making comics and art about mental health as a healing practice and will continue to do so, I've learned that, for myself, it's healthiest to have a creative practice that allows me to separate when I need to. If I'm feeling overwhelmed by Phoney Baloney or Fuzzball and need them go off somewhere else, I can send them away to be in a comic all by themselves, doing something on their own. Embracing my comic-making as a way to both engage directly with and take necessary space from my mental illness has led to a healthy relationship with the practice, which has helped keep me from getting discouraged by the comics I make.

To this end I've found some inspiration from Porcellino's work in how he allows the worlds of his autobiographical, mindful comics and other goofy fictional stories to co-exist; two recurring stories in the collection *King-Cat Classix* are *The Violent Garden,* a whodunit soap opera, and *Racky Raccoon*, about a cynical superhero raccoon, both of which occur in episodes that pop up in between comics about John's life. This seamless integration of fiction and reality creates a special sort of connection between the artist and the world he creates, and that on top of Nachmanovitch's ideas about changing up your creative

practice and Barry's ideas about letting monsters and characters come to you has inspired me to broaden the horizons of my comic world, letting it grow and grow. I have found that, the more characters I make and the more ways I find to connect them together, the richer my comics become and the more fun I have doing them. Doing it this way helps me use the space of my comics however I need to on a given day, and it helps me maintain the practice as a joyful one. That, I think, is giving myself a huge gift.

I think we're reaching a pretty natural conclusion, don't you? This practice of making comics has helped me immensely this year in how I think about my mental health, it has made me happy by teaching me to embrace play in my life, and it has helped me connect with others. In fact, let's remember, one of my biggest concerns early on was the worry that making comics about myself was selfish and unproductive, and that instead what I needed to do to make a good thesis was write about bigger questions, write about communities instead of myself. It was when I learned to let go of that fear of selfishness and embrace my experiences so I could share them with others, because "the more you are yourself, the more universal your message," that my work started to come to me most naturally (Nachmanovitch 179). And I found that Nachmanovitch's words became quite true: the more I let myself fall into what was most true to myself, the feelings I had and how I naturally wanted to express them, the easier it became to share that work and those feelings with others, and the more receptive folks were to them—because they were authentic. I have learned a valuable gift

this year about my creativity that I want to extend to others: that there is so much value in embracing our truest selves, and those selves deserve to be expressed.

I want to wrap things up by returning to returning to childhood drawing and raising some annoyingly existential questions about it. For all the times I've read Nachmanovitch talk about our original nature and recognized that, for whatever reason, comic-making is part of my *own* original nature, I can't ignore an idea bubbling inside of me: that comics are part of humanity's core, too. In *The Unknown Craftsman,* Soetsu Yanagi says that in kids' drawings "the inherent nature of man finds expression without being thwarted or frustrated" (Yanagi 141). Ideas like this and Barry's have pushed me deeper into fits of curiosity about *why* this is the case: *why* is drawing so essential to human expression, and why has it been this way since the beginning? This is something that I don't think I can speak to as well, because it digs deeper than this critical introduction can go. But here are some examples and thoughts I've begun to explore, and a handful of questions to wash them down. For curiosity's sake!

I recently went to the library in search of books on prehistoric art. I found *Cave Art* by Jean Clottes and almost at random flipped to a page with the following blown-up image: the interior of the Altamira Cave in Spain, with natural rock formations running along its wall, bumps in the cave that create different shapes. On two of these natural bumps, there are faded markings: "two big round eyes with thick eyebrows, and a mouth or (muzzle) on the lower part of the protruding rock," and on the other bump similar markings with a "fissure at the bottom [maybe representing] the mouth" (Clottes 278). *Faces!* What

fascinates me so much about this image is the play it shows. This is ancient doodling! I like to imagine whoever was walking through this cave finding this spot on the wall, running their hands along it, and thinking to themselves, "Hey—these rocks look like heads a little bit," and then making the decision to draw on them and transform the rock into something spontaneous and new and alive! I can't know for sure *why* this artist made these faces, but I imagine it's not far off from Barry moving her hand and watching characters appear on the page, or Porcellino drawing special places from memory, or even me transforming my thoughts into funny monsters. All of these actions come from a place of play.

Let's go back even further! During another fit of curiosity, I Googled "world's first doodle" and spent a couple hours reading about a shell dated to about 500,000 years old. Found during the excavation in which the first *Homo erectus* fossil was discovered (by Dutch paleontologist Eugene Dubois in the late 19th century), the shell became of interest because it showed markings which suggested someone quite deliberately opened it by using a sharp tool. Among these markings are a series of very small, barely visible geometric lines. All evidence points towards these lines being intentional: natural weathering patterns on the shell run the other way, and the engraving is distinctly deep. Whoever made this mark probably did so on a fresh, dark shell, meaning the line would have appeared white on a dark surface, not unlike drawing on a chalkboard (Callaway). Imagine *Homo erectus* getting ready to crack open a shell, seeing the effect of scratching their tool across the shell, and perhaps pausing, thinking: *What's this? When I apply my tool to my shell in this way, something brand new*

appears. What's happening? Imagine *Homo erectus* catching this thought and holding it long enough to keep scratching, to lean in, squint maybe, and begin to *draw* these very small lines. To see something—a line—appear out of nowhere! To realize that their own hand could bring about something like this! That they could impact a piece of the physical world like that with the mark of their own hand! What a discovery that would be, to learn your ability to touch and mark the world around you. The world's first doodle! A mind at play!

For some reason that is beyond me right now, it is abundantly clear that making things with our hands and understanding our world through pictures is inherently human. And what of comics? Why should understanding the world through *sequential* pictures be so popular, and come so naturally to some folks like it does to me? I had plenty of moments where my advisor asked me how I decided to pace my comics and move from one panel to another, and lots of the time I didn't know what to tell him. I'm sure much of it comes from reading lots of comics since childhood, learning by seeing, but some of it feels unspoken, like the pattern of a comic just makes sense in my brain. Why should that be the case?

Scott McCloud scratches his head over this a bit in his landmark book *Understanding Comics*, taking us back in time to show us the history of comics. This history, we see from our cave painters and *Homo erectus*, goes way further back than we might first expect. McCloud "gladly admits" himself that he has no idea "where or when comics originated," but he shows us things like a clearly sequential pre-Columbian manuscript from Mexico depicting the hero 8-Deer, a massive French tapestry from the year 1066 depicting the Norman Conquest,

ancient Egyptian sequential paintings and, again, cave paintings (McCloud 10-15). The history of comics, depending on how you look at it, is as massive as human history itself. From our earliest days we have wanted to doodle and understand our world in material pictures—even before we started making languages!—and part of that inclination, as McCloud shows us, has been to understand moments and histories through pictures in sequences. This is as far as I'll take my argument, because I have no idea *why* this is the case. Would anyone really know? All I know for sure is that, for *some reason,* comics and drawing are at our core. And that makes me appreciate my comic-making all the more—it feels good and a little cosmic to tap into something that mysteriously human! I think of it this way: if I were to show Fuzzball or *Creature City* to whoever drew those faces in the cave all those years ago, they would still be able to recognize *something* in the images I had drawn. Drawing transcends language and gets at core human recognition of the world around us. I think that's magic. McCloud believes, as do I, that making comics is a type of expression that makes us "head for home," or tap back into something true and human that is with all of us always (McCloud 149). This is why we draw as kids! Nachmanovitch says it himself: "We are born with our original nature," something in us that wants to express and play and discover, but "as we grow up, we accommodate to the patterns and habits of our culture" (Nachmanovitch 25). We are all born with this unspoken connection to the want—the *need*—to draw and reimagine the physical world around us on paper. Like Lynda Barry says, we are all born this way and don't need anyone to *tell us* to draw. We just do it. While talking to Porcellino, he used

a phrase I can't get out of my head: "when it comes down to it, it's just a human hand holding a stick" (Porcellino). *A human hand holding a stick*! That is what I share in common with those cave artists when I sit down to draw Fuzzball. I am a human with a need to process my world, and when I become a *human hand holding a stick*, I use that tool like *Homo erectus* did and process my world through drawing. Me, the cave artists, *Homo erectus*, the Egyptians painters, Lynda Barry, John Porcellino, and the old man sketching behind me right now at this coffee shop likely have very different thoughts and goals while we draw. And yet we are all human hands holding sticks, and for some reason all our brains light up when we draw. That's as much as I can say for sure.

I've spoken a lot in this introduction, because there's just a lot to say. While working on this project I've started to feel my brain bloom a little bit; I've opened myself to play and inspiration from all over, and it feels impossible to capture all of that here. But I think if it boils down to anything, it's this: comic-making has this mysterious but undeniable connection to human nature, and that is part of why it feels so good to do. It helps us express ourselves and understand ourselves and our world. It helps us practice mindfulness and meditation. It helps us to heal and connect with others. What an outrageously good toolkit! I know several things: making comics makes me feel alive, it makes me feel free, it is true to who I am and have been since I was a kid, and the chance it gives me to connect with others humbles me. I am thrilled to share the comics I've made so far, and even more excited to keep making them. When I turn in this Independent

Study, I know that I am just going to turn around and make more comics. And that feels really, really good. Here is *Greenbean Comics*!

Works Cited

Barry, Lynda. *Making Comics.* Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly, 2019.

---. *Picture This.* Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly, 2010.

---. *What It Is.* Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly, 2008.

Brunetti, Ivan. *Aesthetics.* New Haven, Yale University Press, 2013.

Callaway, Ewen. "*Homo erectus* made world's oldest doodle 500,000 years ago." *Nature: International Weekly Journal of Science*, 3 December 2014.

Clottes, Jean. *Cave Art.* London, Phaidon Press, 2008.

Davis, Juliana, "Dancing with Wooster: Strengthening Community through Self-expression and Collaborative Art" (2019). *Senior Independent Study Theses*. Paper 8317.

McCloud, Scott. *Understanding Comics.* New York, William Morrow, 1993.

Murakami, Haruki. *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running*. New York, Vintage Books, 2008.

Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art.* New York, Tarcher/Putnam, 1990.

Ono, Yoko. *Grapefruit.* New York, Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Porcellino, John. Personal interview. 31 January 2020.

---. *From Lone Mountain.* Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly, 2018.

---. *King-Cat Classix and Stories.* Montreal, Drawn & Quarterly, 2007.

Sun, Connie. "A Certain Solace." *Instagram*, posted 21 February 2020.

"Track by Track: Frog – 'Count Bateman.'" *The Alternative*, 19 August 2019.

Yanagi. *The Unknown Craftsman.* Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1972.

GREENBEAN COMICS

AN INDEPENDENT STUDY !!!

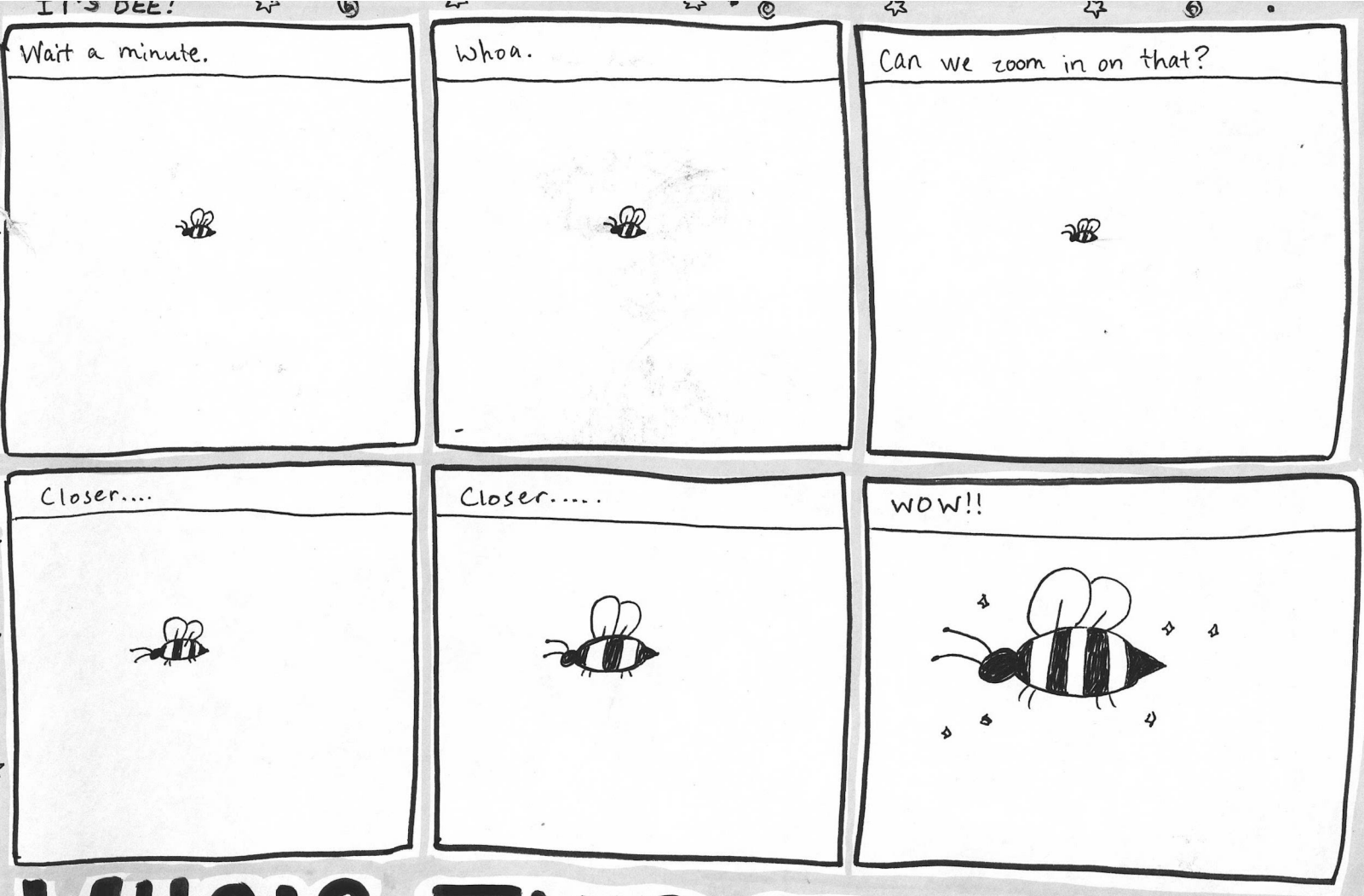
BY ME!!!

BLASTOFF

TO A WORLD OF SPIRALLING DREAD, PATIENCE, CONFUSION, SELF-LOVE, AND WEIRD LITTLE MONSTERS!

COMICS FROM SEPTEMBER 2019 - MARCH 2020

IT'S BEE!



WHO'S THIS LITTLE BEAUTY?

This is **BEE**! Isn't she stunning? She may be small but she's got a really big brain and heart. She is a voice of reason, always ready to help us out when our brains are getting the best of us. She reminds us to be patient to ourselves and those around us, to see the best in ourselves, to believe that we are loved and valued, to take care of ourselves, and she reminds us that we're okay when we feel so not okay. What a good, small friend! What would we ever do without her?!

WHO'S THIS FRIGHTENING ONE?

HEEEEEERE'S FUZZBALL

WHO IS THIS FUZZY FREAK?

This is **FUZZBALL.** He's very exhausting and I think he only knows how to scream. He's always breaking down doors and sweating because he thinks someone hates him. He's the kind of booger that'll make you over-think every little thing you do, convince you that everyone is mad at you or that you can't make decisions or that you're going to be a total failure. Isn't that totally obnoxious?

And yet.... isn't he totally convincing? And he's got <u>great</u> legs. Probably from all the frantic running and screaming. Could anyone with legs <u>that</u> nice lie to me?

A VISIT FROM PHONEY BALONEY

WHAT IS A PHONEY BALONEY?

A phoney baloney is the voice in our heads that tells us we're fooling ourselves! That we're making it all up! That we don't deserve to make space for our feelings because they're all fake, or not allowed to do that thing, because somebody already did it, and better. A phoney baloney is the imposter syndrome that makes us believe we're unqualified to do what we love + unallowed to feel what we feel. What an asshole! But..... he's kinda cute, isn't he? Don't you wanna stuff him in your pocket and take him everywhere?

HOW ROMANTIC!

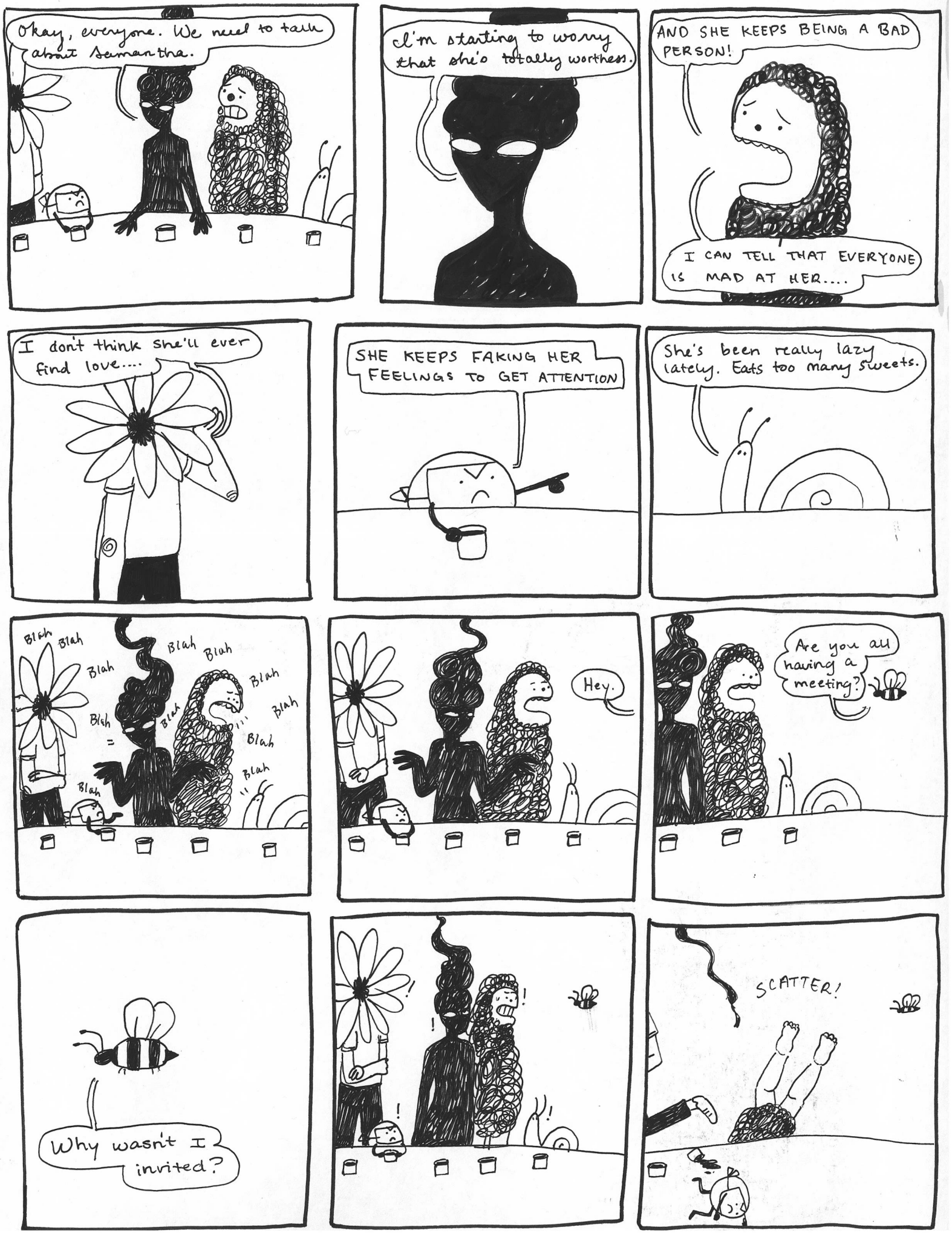
WHO'S RESPONSIBLE FOR SUCH A CHARMING GIFT?

Oh... this is **FLOWERHEAD.** I can't stop thinking about them. We're all looking for love in some capacity, and for a long, long time (too long?) Flowerhead is the kind of love I've been yearning & aching for. Flowerhead is so good to me. They ask me on dates, they tell me I'm beautiful, they tell me stories and hold me for hours. They are perfect and patient and so full of sunshine. I want to be with them forever. But they have a weird habit of disappearing, turning into a zombie, and forgetting I exist. Sigh....

Have you found a Flowerhead? Do you want one, or is your heart blooming somewhere else?


SPACED OUT
Bee where am I
You're at breakfast.
Pssst... Bee... where am I
In class.
Bee where am I
On the phone with your Mom.
Baby?...
Ohhhhhhhh how do I describe this bizarre feeling?
It's not like I LITERALLY don't know where I am. It feels like swirly eyes + floaty brain and.... uh, I don't know....
LIKE I'M IN a giant bubble!
Like I'm drunk...
Like nothing around me is really real...
Like I keep forgetting how I got places, like I blacked out but didn't?
Like time is LONG— like things that happened 1 hour ago happened in another life.
Do you get this feeling?
Do you have the words for it? Isn't it weird?
2

A CONFERENCE.



SPACED OUT #2 — MELTING


Oh no....
Ohhh no.....
Whaaaat...
Come on, WTF...

HERE IS A COMIC ON THE FLY

oy me! on NOV 18, 2019 I'm sitting in the sun.

WHO, ME?

HI! I feel like I have nothing to say today, so I'm trying out something new. Just letting a comic come out of me without planning it too hard! I don't know what this page will look like when I'm done but I'm trying to play around with spontaneous discovery.

Sound good to you?

NOV 19 ↓

OKAY so it's been 24⊕ hours since I drew that last panel. Clearly I did not let this comic "come out of me without thinking too hard."

But I don't think this is a failed experiment.

Improv is good!

Today I went & tried meditation, something I've been wanting to try.

It felt OK — my vision went fuzzy & time passed quickly.

I've been thinking about how I can find peaceful, meditative states when I make these comics,

because sometimes it feels like this....

GODD DDD WHYYY YYYYY

THIS TAKES SO LONG & FEELS SO UNPRODUCTIVE

I'M JUST DRAWING MYSELF OVER & OVER AGAIN! WHY AM I WASTING MY TIIII MEEEE

NOOOOOOOOOO

NOOOOOOO

I'd like to discover how to make this process of comic-making as peaceful, meditative &, frankly, healing as possible! I want to breathe when I make these lines....

in..... out..... in..... out.....

... or take the time to think & process things in my mind/heart/life.....

... or listen to music, podcasts, conversations around me...

basically, I want to keep searching for ways to make this creative practice something that brings me, JOY & CALM.

BUT!!!!

follow me!

BECAUSE ISN'T THIS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT?

Ahem... I present some recent issues with

MEDICINE

NOV 13, 2019

- ★ starting a new medication
- ★ not knowing what'll do
- ★ feeling invalid/undeserving of help like this
- ★ afraid of losing some oddly comforting sad feelings

YOU KNOW?


Yeah, but do you really?
...
Because Phoney Baloney told me you were faking it.
Yeah, well, Phoney Baloney's an idiot.
My psychiatrist said—
CRASH!
WHAT IF YOU LIED TO YOUR PSYCHIATRIST
God, Fuzzball, go away! I did not lie to my psychiatrist.
MMMMMM ARE YOU SUUURE
Uh—uh, I.....
HEY, IDIOT!
ARE YOU MAKING A COMIC WHINING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS YOU PROBABLY DON'T EVEN HAVE?
Um.... uhhhhhh

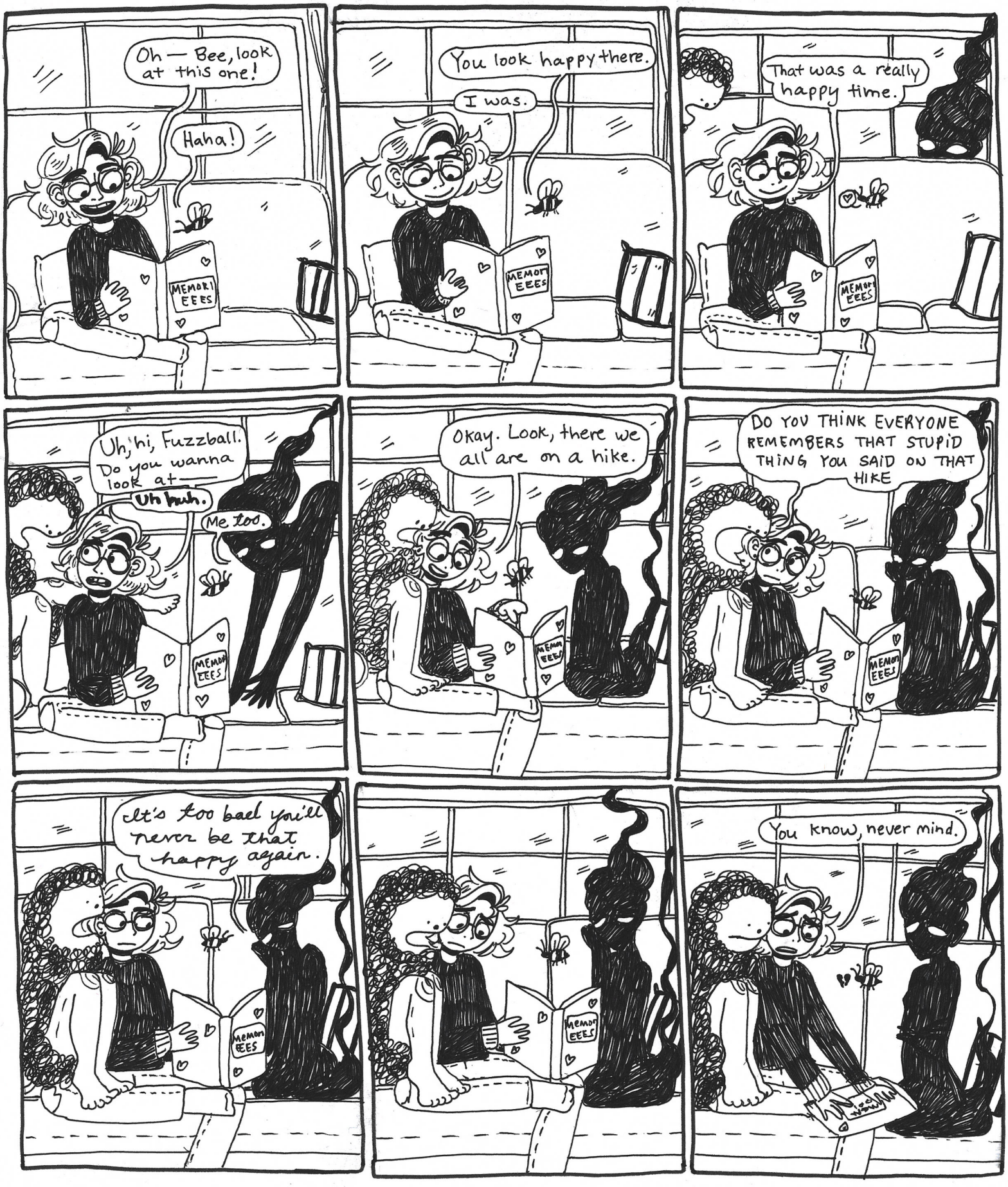

Blah blah blah blah blah
BLAH BLAH BLAH
BLAHHHHHHHH
HEY!
whoa!
Scatter, you jerks!
sigh....
Bee, do I even need to be taking these?
Yes! You've been feeling bad for a long time and deserve to try out this option.
But what if everyone's right? What if I have been making all of this up and I don't have any "real" problems?
You can't listen to them, Samantha. You can't deny yourself the chance to get better, even if you only need a little medicine for a little while! Mental health is a spectrum, remember?
Just because you don't feel severely, desperately bad doesn't mean you don't feel bad at all. It's not a competition! You deserve to try out some options to take care of yourself. Okay?
Bee, you're so smart. Who taught you so much about this, anyways?
I think you did.
Now take your medicine.
'Kay.

A DAY WITH FUZZBALL

Greenbean Comics 11/29/19

REPEAT THIS COMIC AS MANY TIMES AS NECESSARY

Memory Lane


Oh — Bee, look at this one!
Haha!
MEMORI EEES
You look happy there.
I was.
MEMOR EEES
That was a really happy time.
MEMOR EEES
Uh, hi, Fuzzball. Do you wanna look at—
Uh huh.
Me too.
MEMOR EEES
Okay. Look, there we all are on a hike.
MEMOR EEES
DO YOU THINK EVERYONE REMEMBERS THAT STUPID THING YOU SAID ON THAT HIKE
MEMOR EEES
It's too bad you'll never be that happy again.
MEMOR EEES
MEMOR EEES
You know, never mind.

Oh boy... I present ANOTHER (WEIRD & CONFUSING)

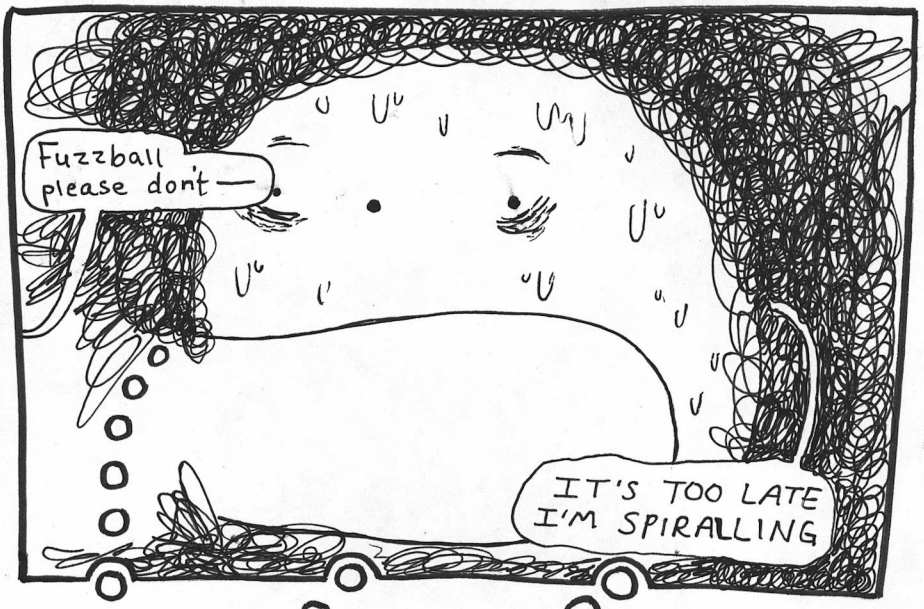
PROBLEM WITH MEDICINE

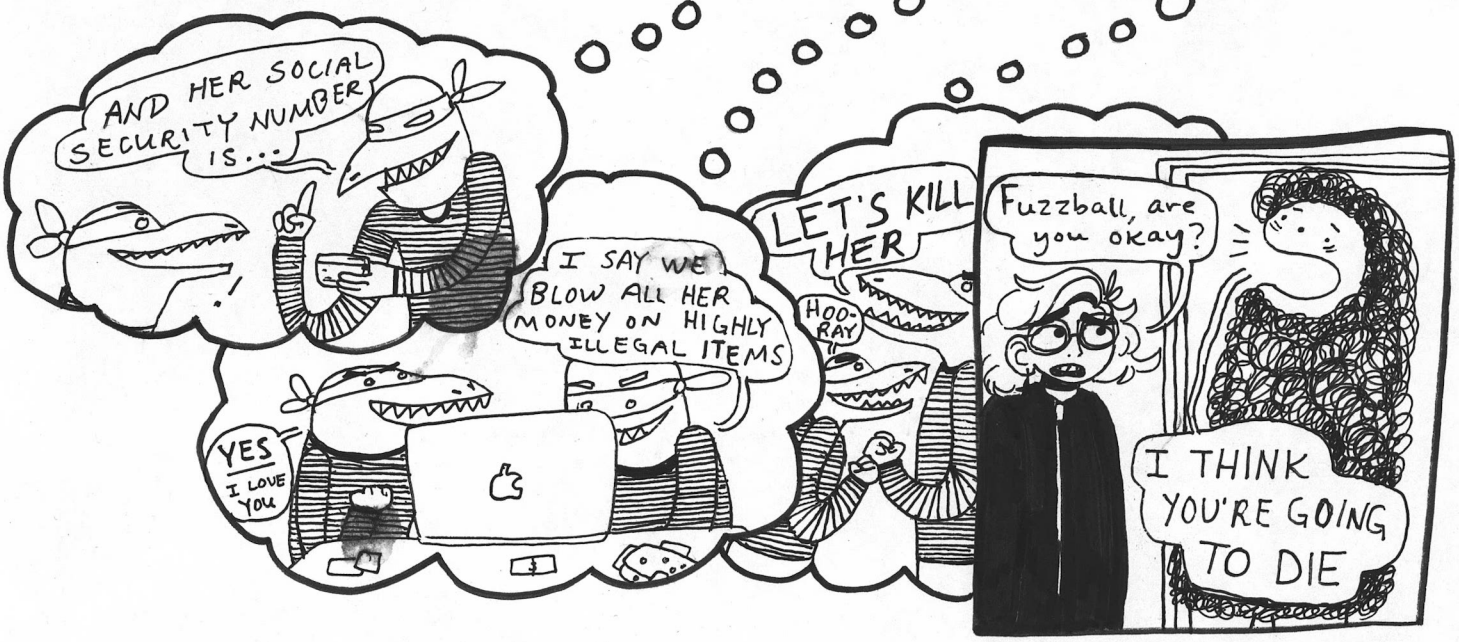
12/26/19

LOST WALLET!

BASED ON A TRUE STORY — THREE * HOURS OF TERROR!

* 45 mins away





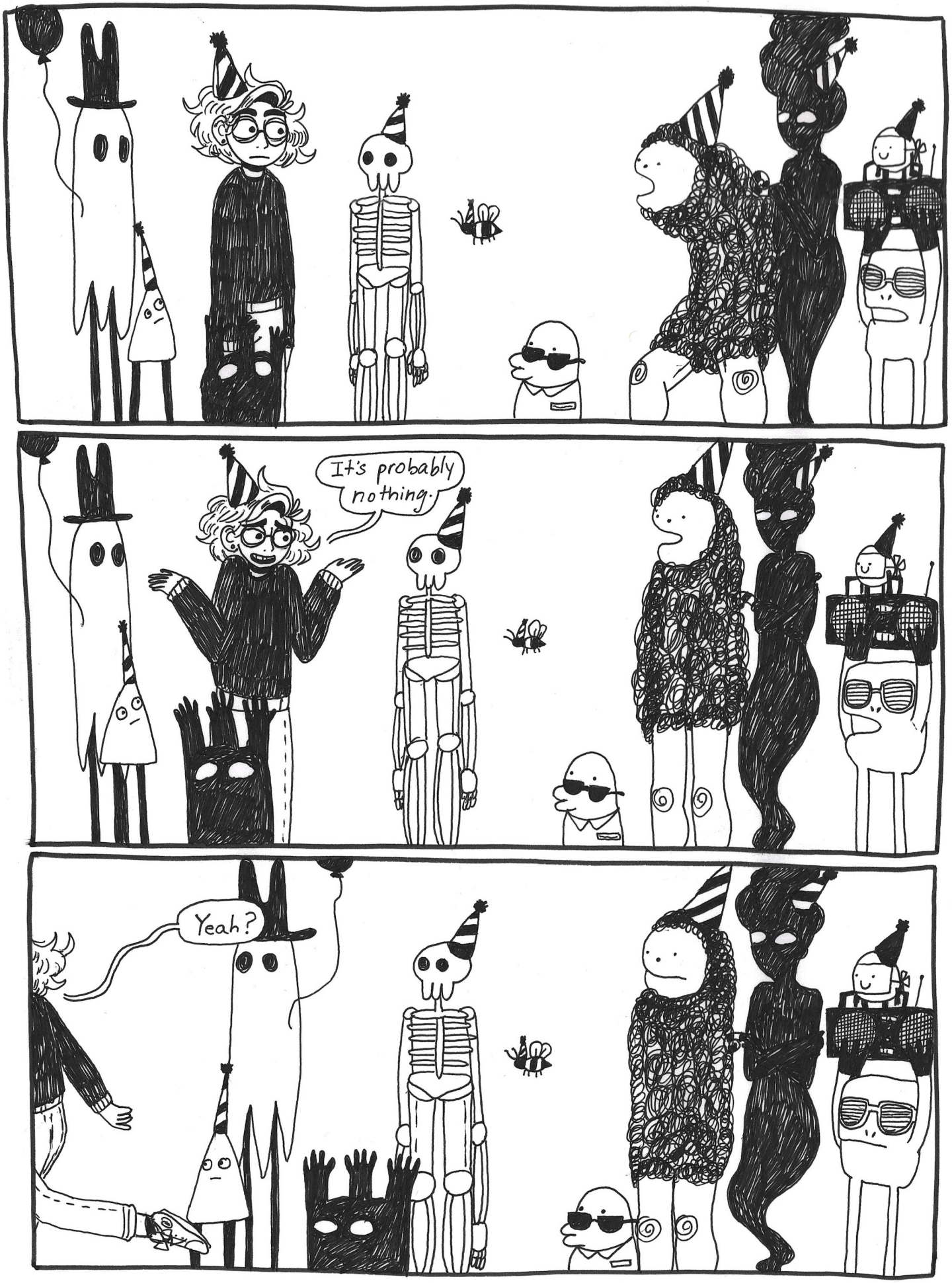
OOPS #1

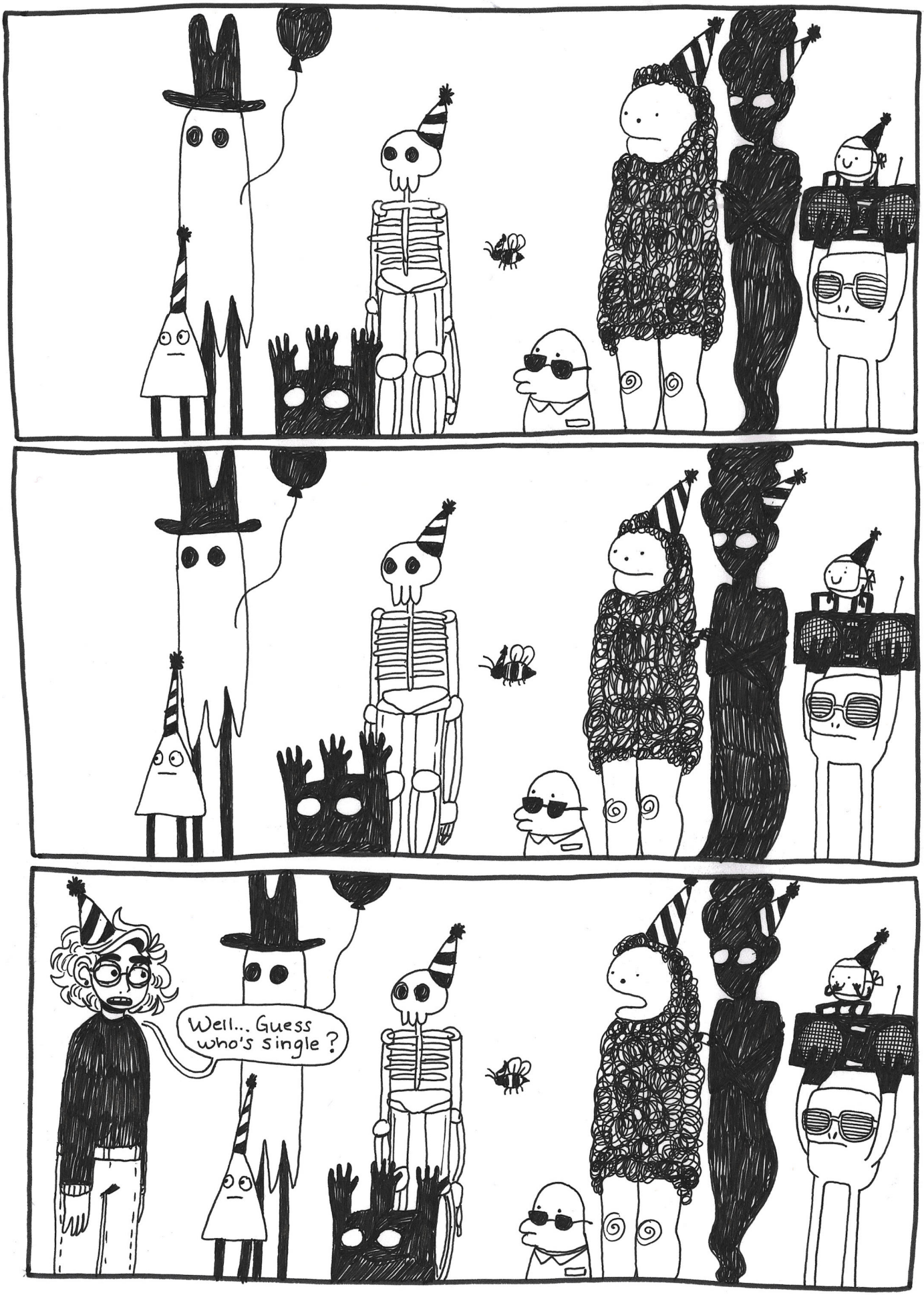

conversation
conversation
CONVO
conversation!
Question?
Answer!
ACCIDENTAL SEXUAL INNUENDO
gfffft
OH NO I MADE TOO MANY PANELS

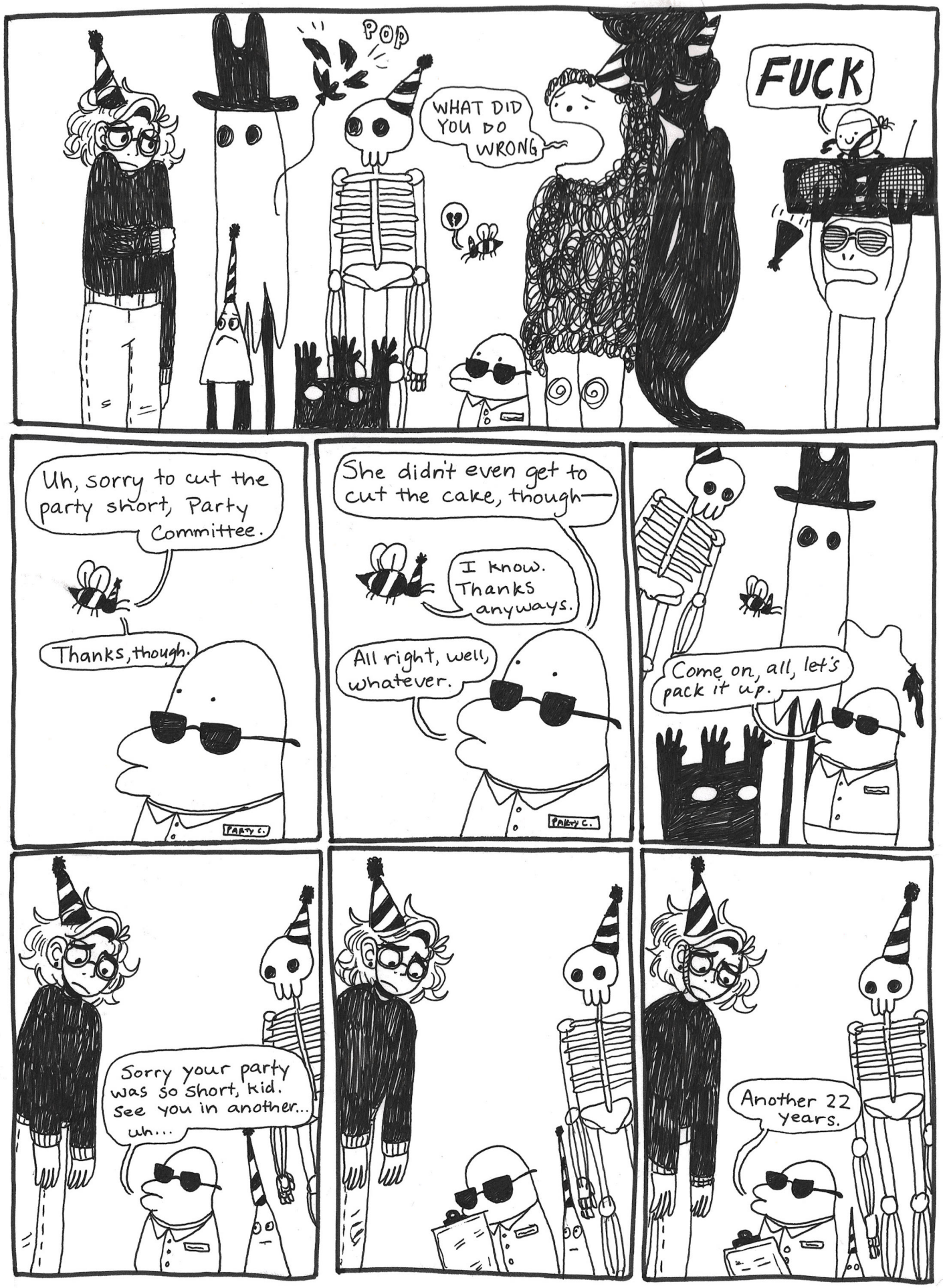
FEELIN' BETTER

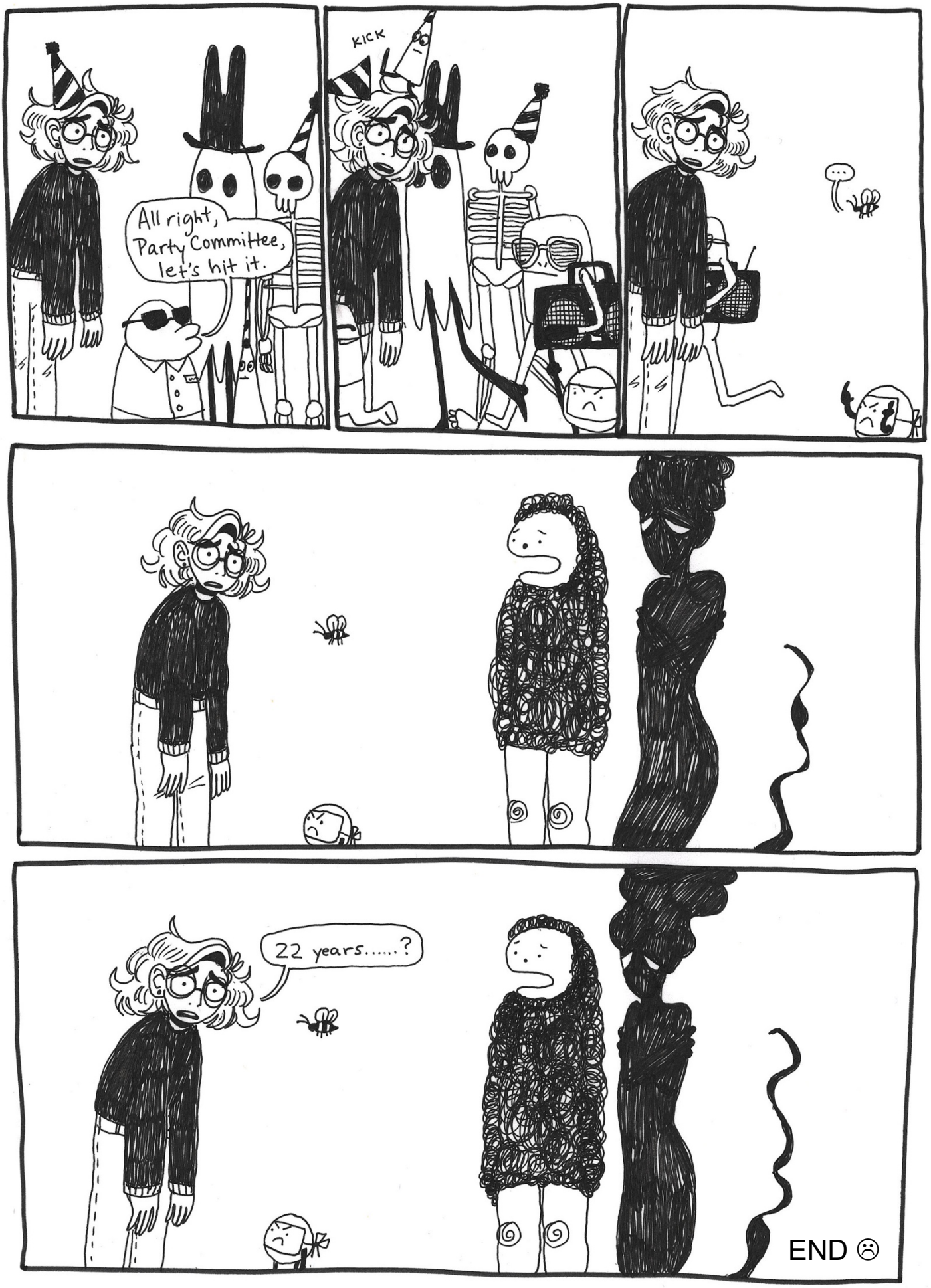
A Comic ABOUT Lusa

SAMANTHA FINDS A PARTNER!


It's probably nothing.
Yeah?

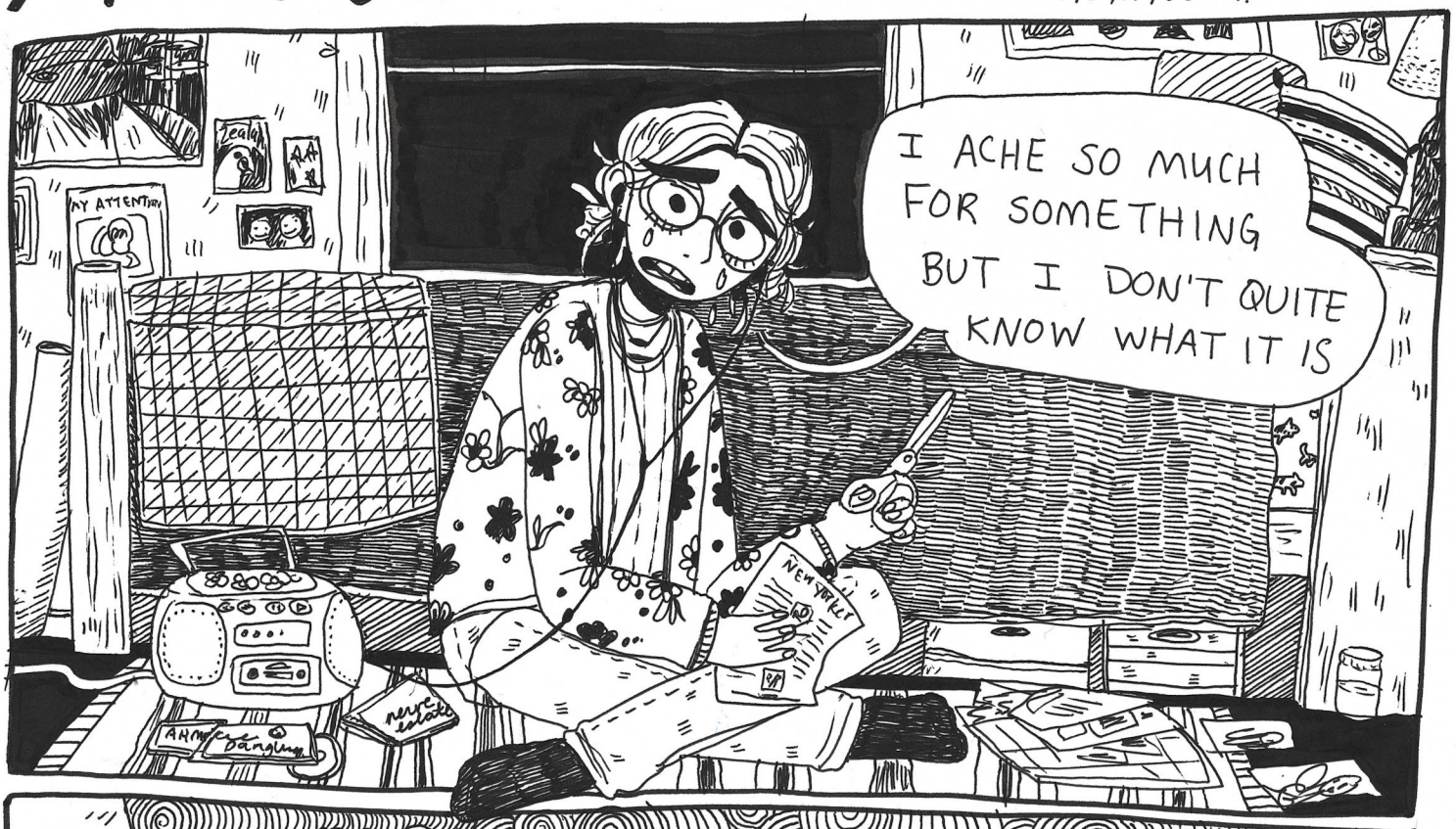

Well... Guess who's single?


Pop
WHAT DID YOU DO WRONG
FUCK
Uh, sorry to cut the party short, Party Committee.
Thanks, though.
PARTY C.
She didn't even get to cut the cake, though—
I know. Thanks anyways.
All right, well, whatever.
PARTY C.
Come on, all, let's pack it up.
Sorry your party was so short, kid. See you in another... uh...
Another 22 years.


All right, Party Committee, let's hit it.
KICK
22 years.....?
END ☹

A Quick Word...

ON FEBRUARY 1ST, 2020..... I am COLLAGING and FEELING SORRY FOR MYSELF!!!



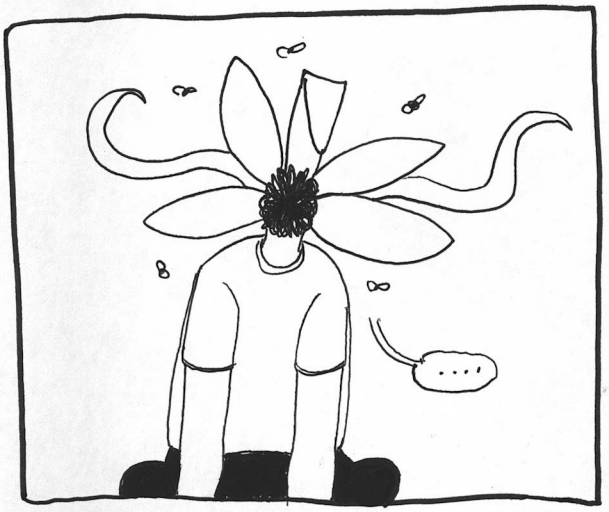

FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE!!!
NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!
NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!
NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE! NO MORE!

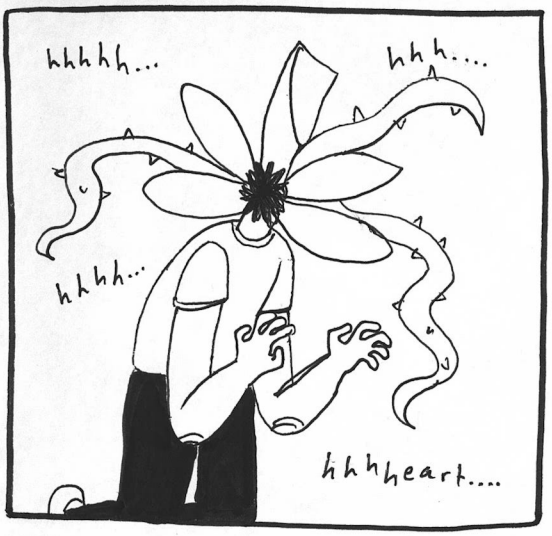
FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #1

FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #2

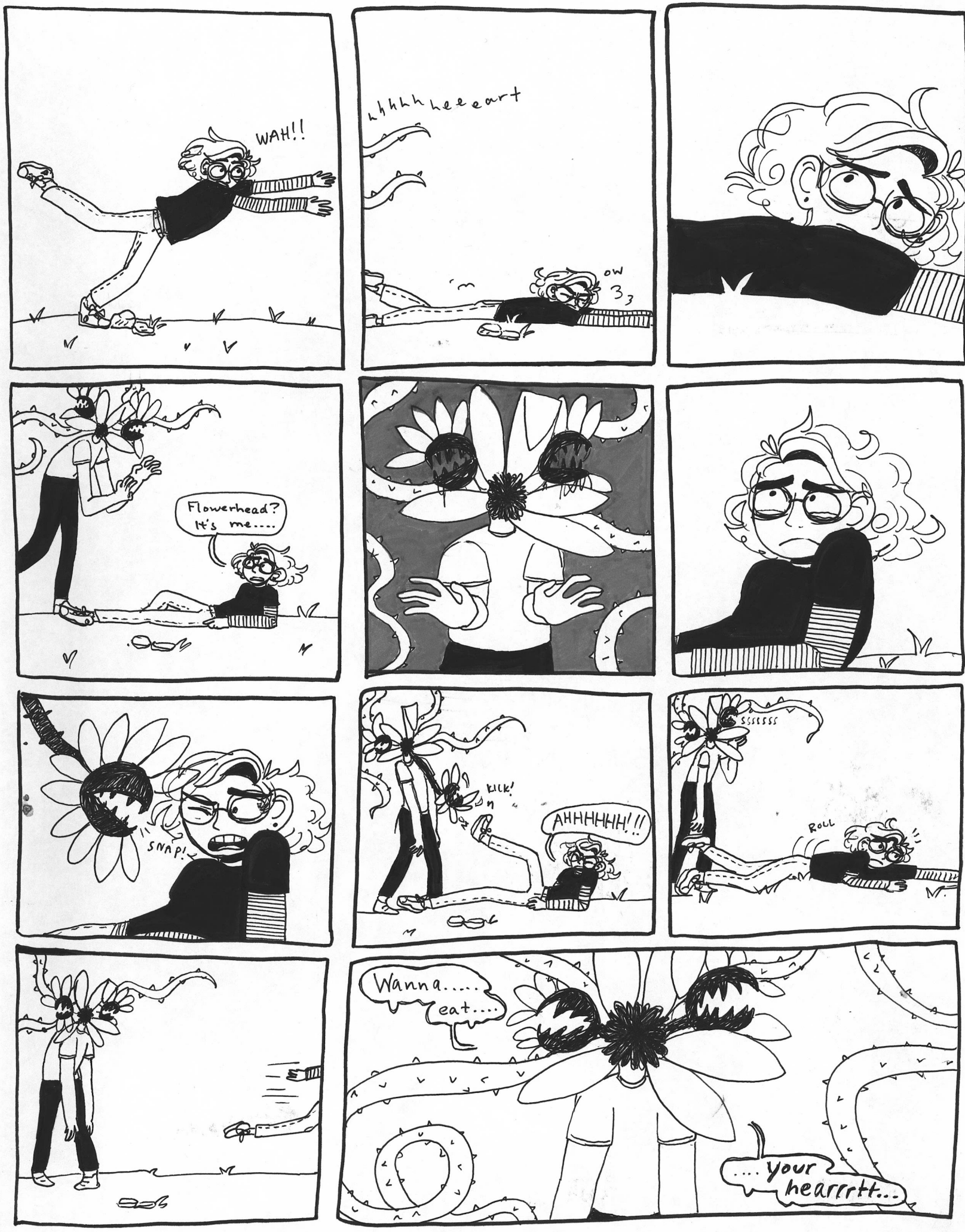
FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #3

FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #4





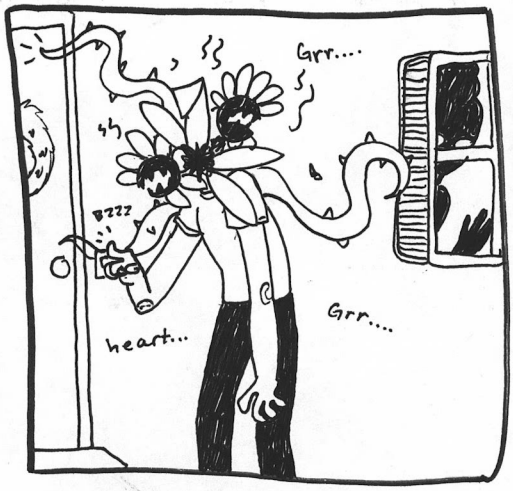

AHHHHHHHHHH
!!
throw!
NO!!
THANKS FOR THE DAAAATEE
?
Wanna... eat... your hearrrtt.....
hhhhhearrt...
hhhhearrtttt ttttt ttt
HEARRTTT
Wahha...
eat your....
h—
h....
he....
HEART
HOLY SHIT

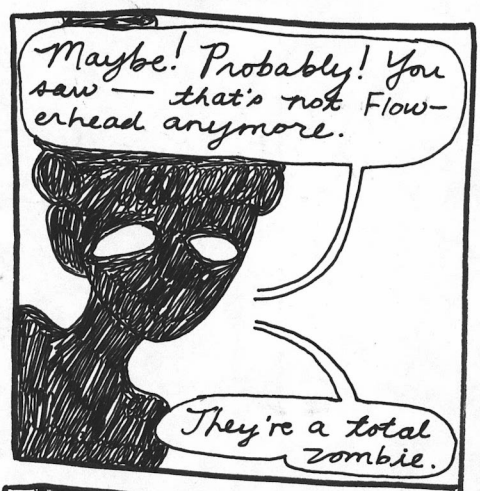

WAH!!
hhhhheeeart
ow
3_3
Flowerhead? It's me....
SNAP!
KLK!
AHHHHHH!!!
SSSSSSS
ROLL
Wanna..... eat....
....your hearrrtt...

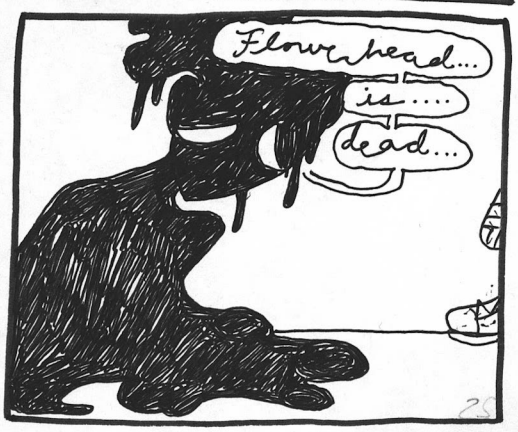
FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #5


Scared?
Ah~!
Oh, Lusa... when did you get here?
You sounded sad. Thought d'd stop by.
Now....
What's scary?
It's Flowerhead! There's something really wrong with them. I think they're trying to kill me...?
Yeah? Did they turn into a zombie?
YES!! How did you know?!
Oh, I was afraid this would happen....
Oh, Lusa! I'm so scared! I—
BANG!
BANG!
BANG!
Oh no....
BANG!
BANG!
BANG!

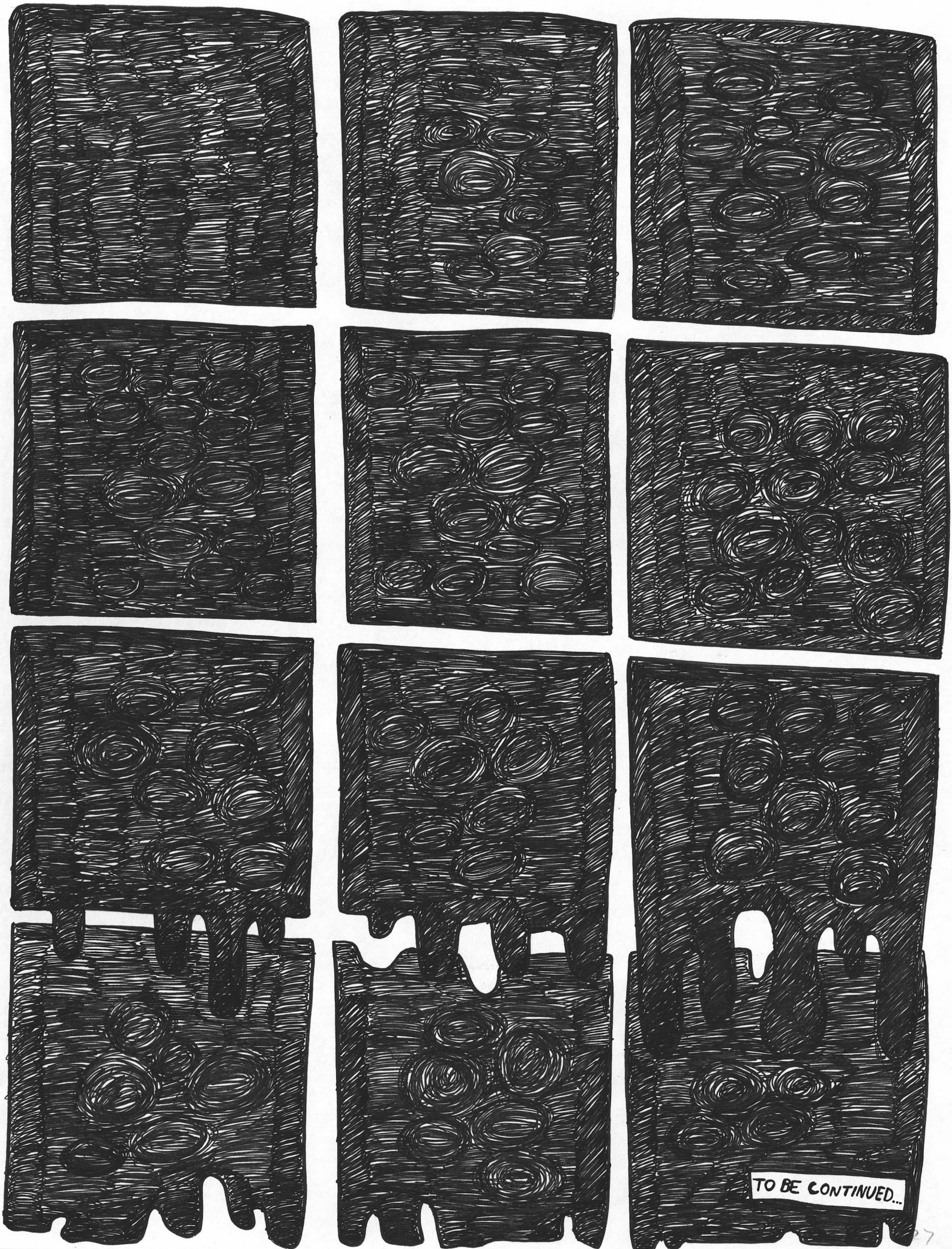
FLOWERHEAD APOCALYPSE #6








dead....
Flowerhead is dead....
Flowerhead is dead...
dead...
oh...
Uh.... Lusa...?
Lusa??
dead....
LUSA! PULL IT TOGETHER!
LUSA STOP!
LUSA I'M GONNA
DROWN!!!!!!


TO BE CONTINUED...

GREENBEAN COMICS

EMOTIONAL TURMOIL!

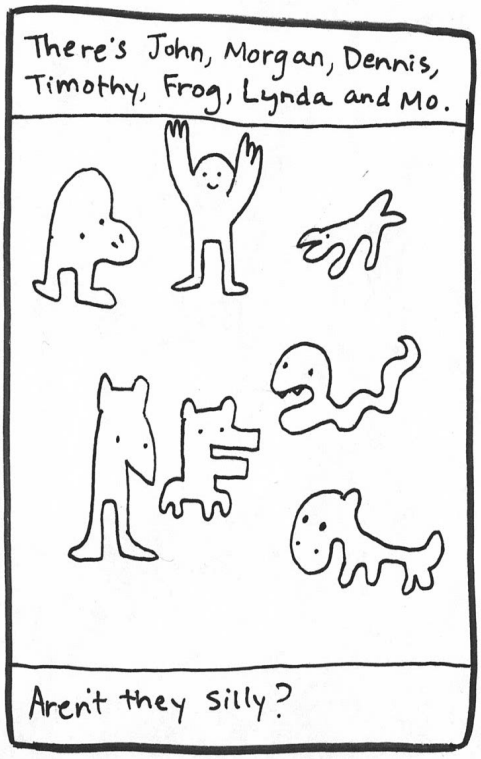
MOMENTS OF JOY!

VALIDATION + PATIENCE!

FUNNY MONSTERS!

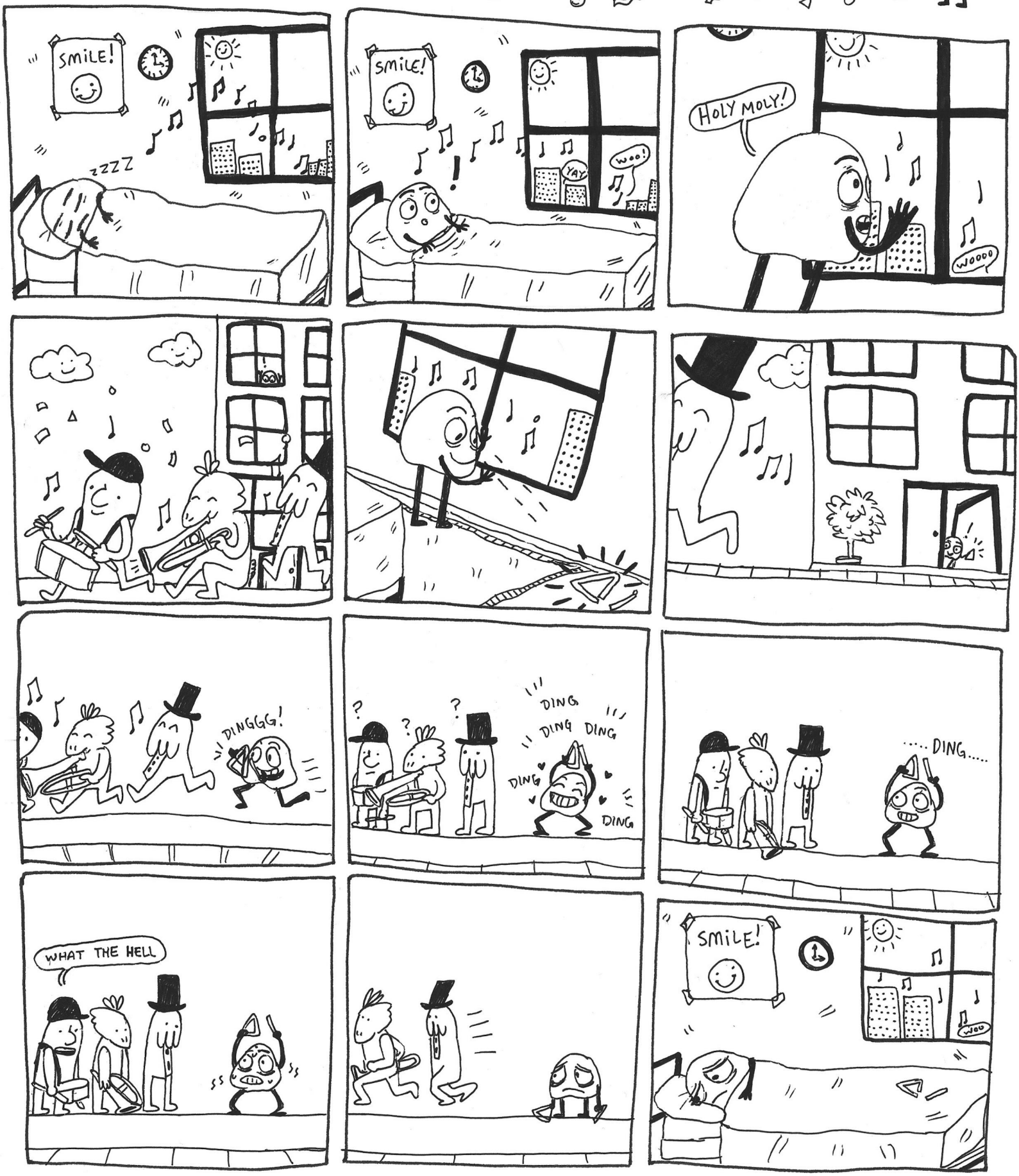
WELCOME TO CREATURE CITY!!!!

EPISODE 1: Our Silly City



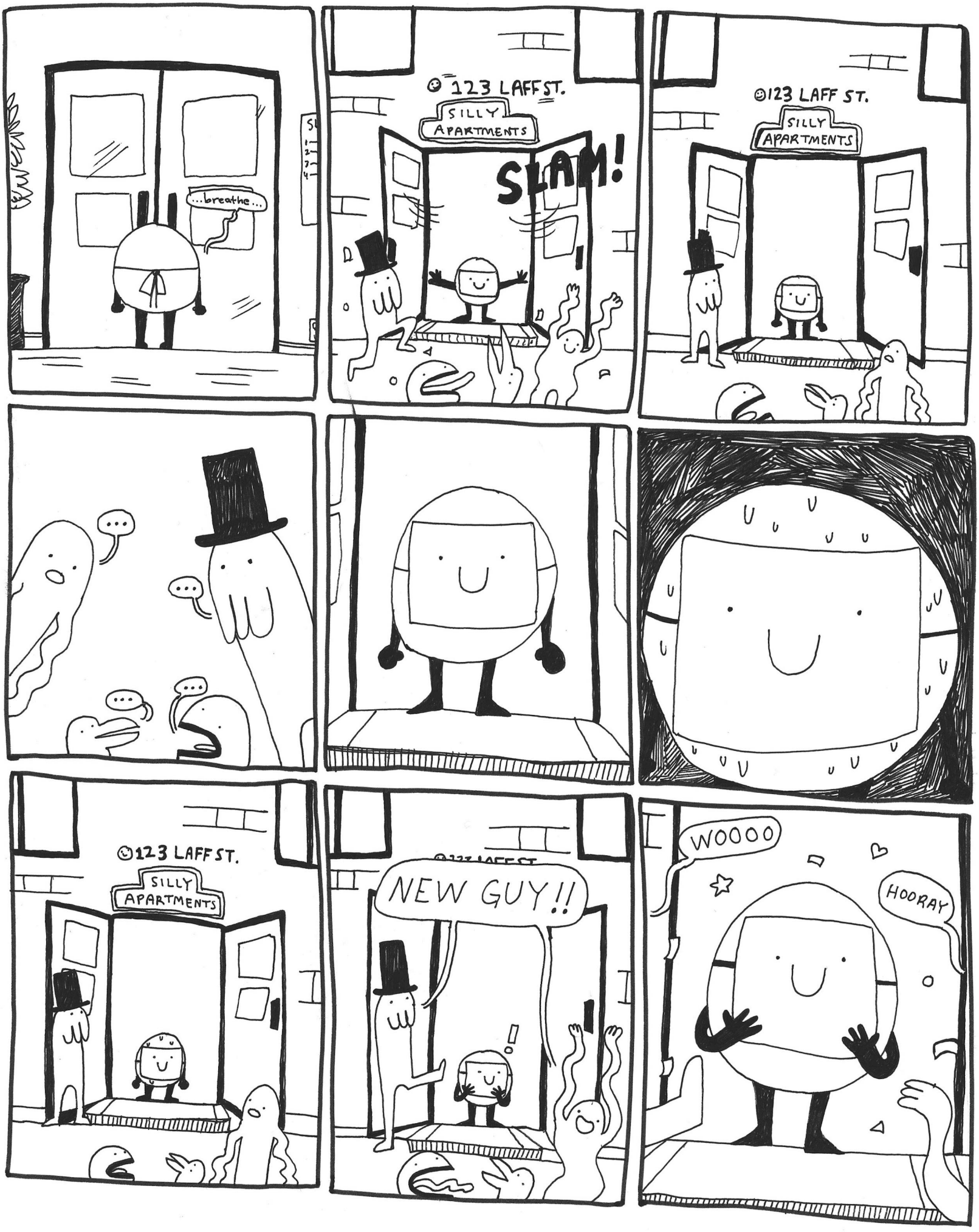
Welcome to CREATURE CITY!

EPISODE 2: BAND!



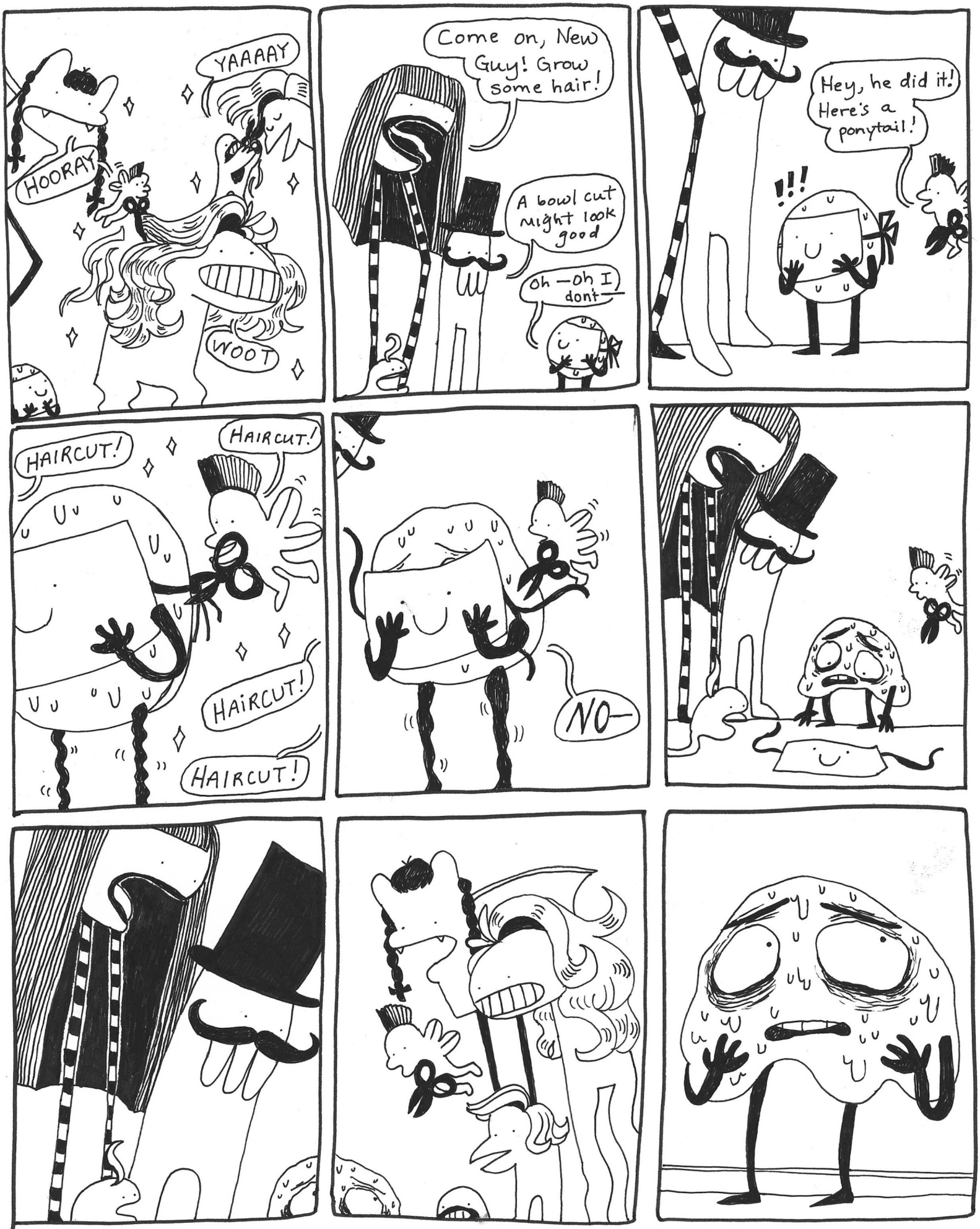
WELCOME TO CREATURE CITY!

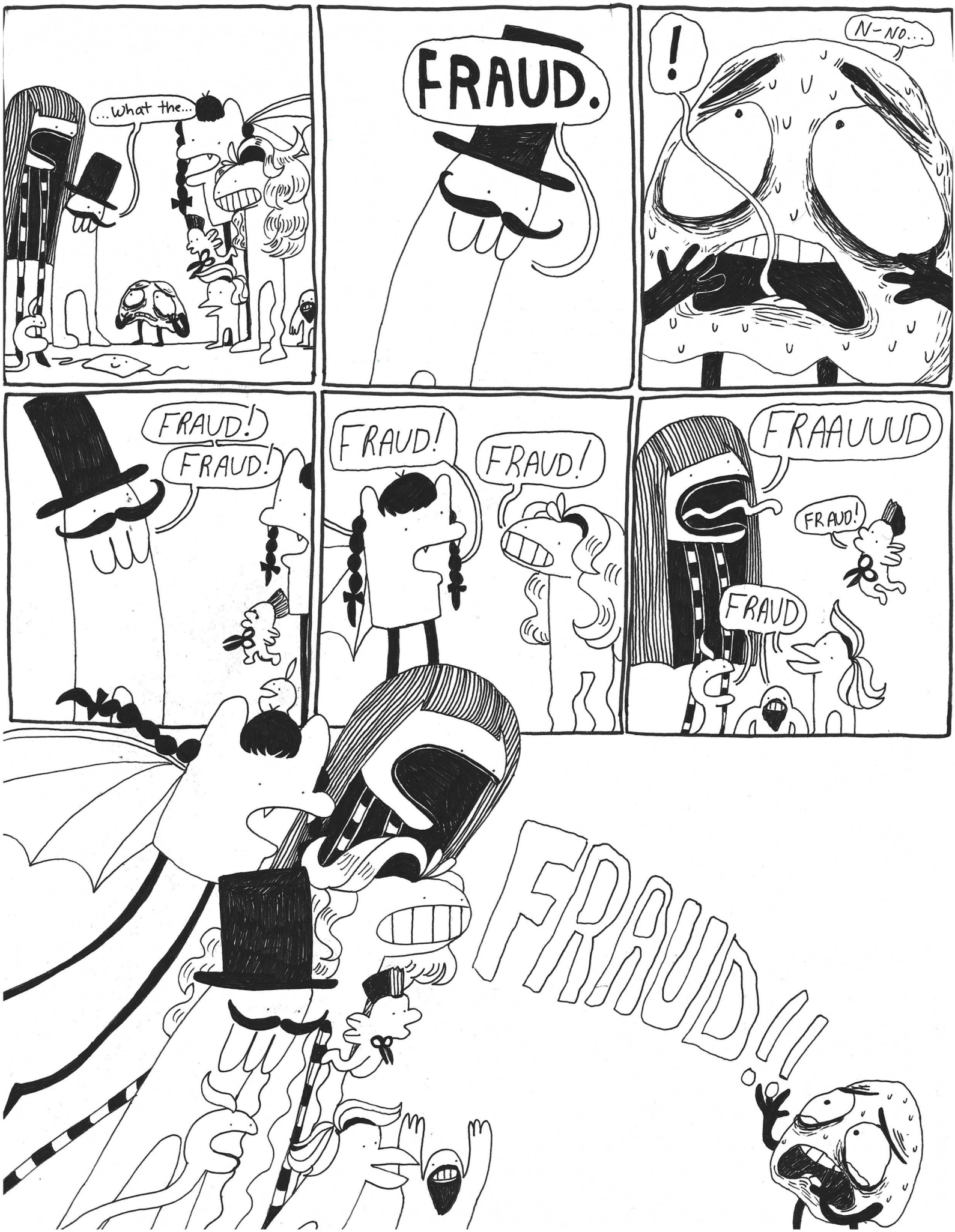

Believe in Yourself
Believe in Yourself
SMILE!
LOVE
WOOOOOT
FRAGILE
THIS SIDE UP
YOU LOOK GOOD!


...breathe...
123 LAFF ST.
SILLY APARTMENTS
SLAM!
123 LAFF ST.
SILLY APARTMENTS
123 LAFF ST.
SILLY APARTMENTS
NEW GUY!!
WOOOO
HOORAY


EVERYBODY WIGGLE
STRIKE!
COOL
HEHE
Bowl
I AM BEAUTIFUL NO MATTER WHAT THEY SAY
Silly Songz
HAPPY HOUR
12:00AM -12:00AM!
24/7!
Free REFILLS & KISSES!
!!!!!!!!


MAYOR
CHIP
CANDY
HEY!
Let's do haircuts!
CHiP!
YAYYYYYY
MAYOR
CHIP!
YAY
COOL!
KICK!
YA
Haircuts?
But we don't have any hair.
CHiP!
HAH! Good one, New Guy.
You know we can grow hair on command.
?!
CHiP!
IT'S PART OF WHAT MAKES US SO SILLY!!!!!
POOF!
POOF!
GROW!
?!
CHiP!
WOOO
YAAAY
YAY

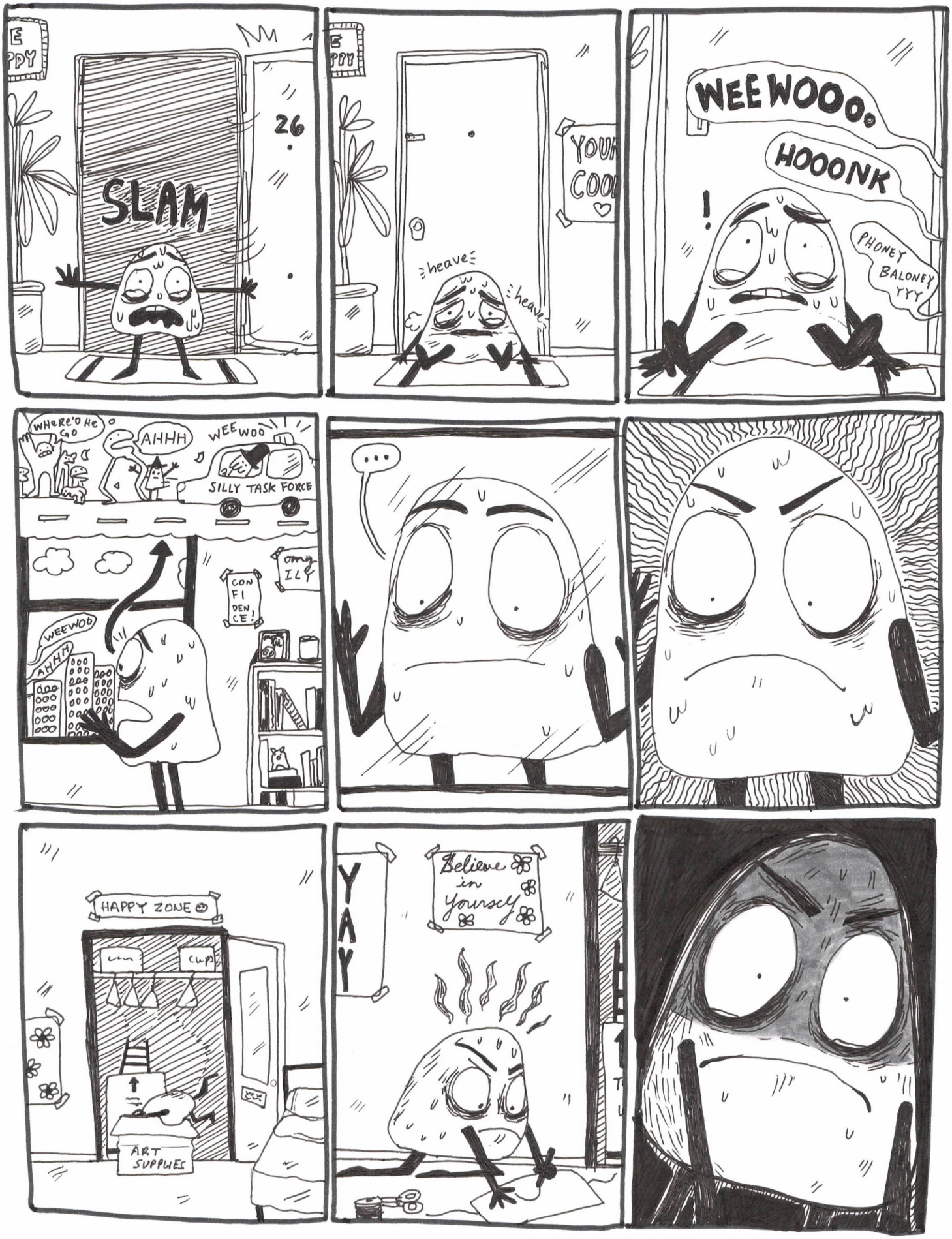

YAAAAY
HOORAY
WOOT
Come on, New Guy! Grow some hair!
A bowl cut might look good
Oh—oh I don't
Hey, he did it! Here's a ponytail!
!!!
HAIRCUT!
HAIRCUT!
HAIRCUT!
HAIRCUT!
NO—


...What the...
FRAUD.
!
N-NO...
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
FRAAUUUD
FRAUD!
FRAUD
FRAUD!!


NO!!
COOL!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
SILLY J
OPEN
sniff!
BUS STOP
BUMP!
OOF
Uh — I'm sorry, I — I uh...
Hey, it's that fraud everyone was talkin' about
Fraud
YIPPEEE
?!
TRY Funny Chips CRUNCH!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
Fraud
FRAUD
FRAUD

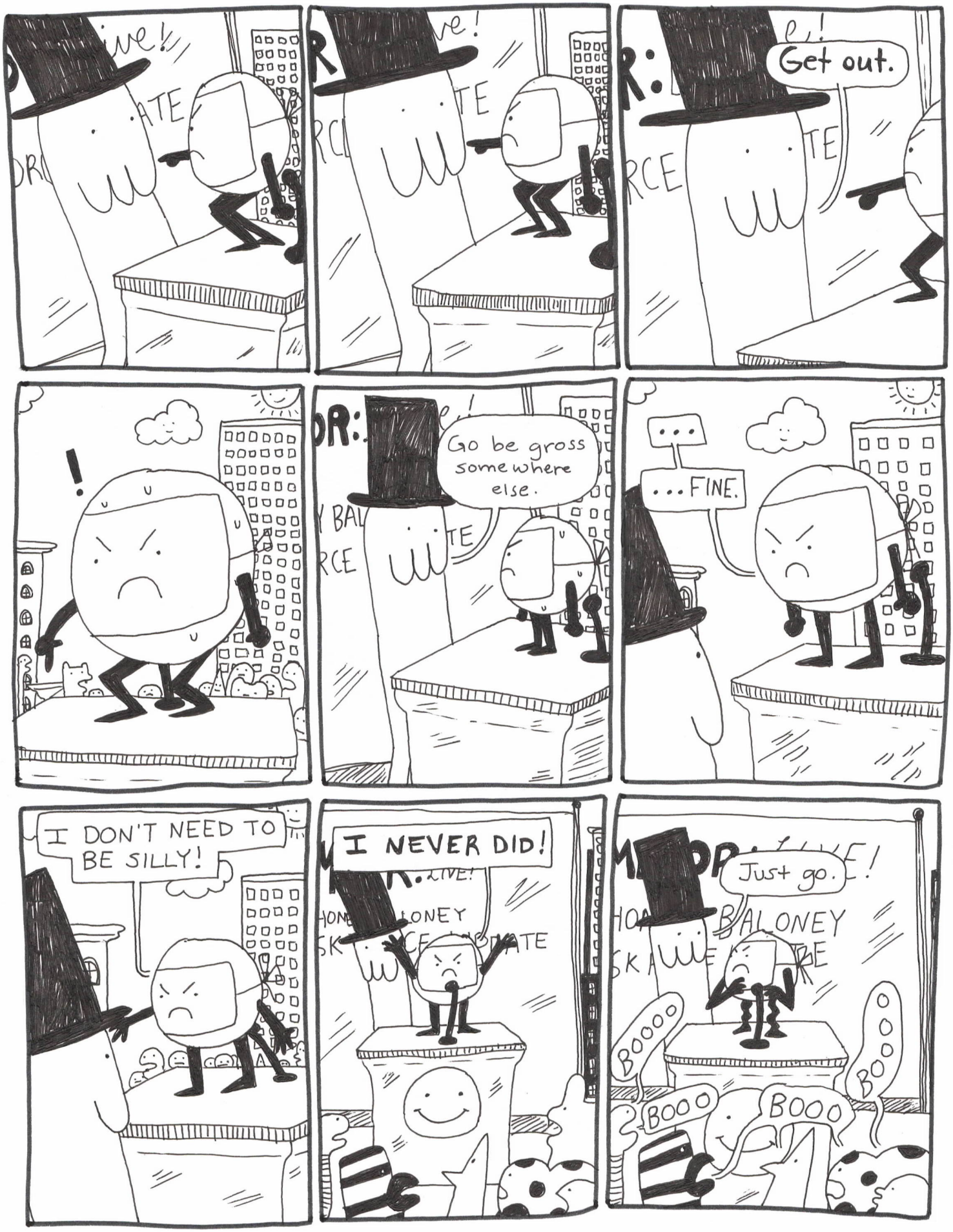

Funny Chips
CRUNCH! 8
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
FRAUD
FRAUD
FRA
CRUNCH!
FRAUD!
FRAUD!
WHAT THE—
?!
SMACK
FRAUD
ON THE
LOOSE
REWARD: CANDY!!
WHAT—
WHAT IS
GOING ON
?
?
?
!
KZZZZZT


Kzzt
Attention, silly ones! This is your silly mayor speaking!
Kzz
Kzzt
Knock knock!
WHO'S THERE
WHO'S THERE
.....who's there
WHO IS THERE
FRAUD ON THE LOOSE!
FRAUD ON THE LOOSE WHO?
There's a fraud on the loose and I fear for our city's silliness!
Please be on the lookout for a very sad, panicked-looking blob.
He is a phoney baloney and ate a lot of my snacks.
Avoid at all costs!
PHONEY BALONEY!
NOOOOO
NO

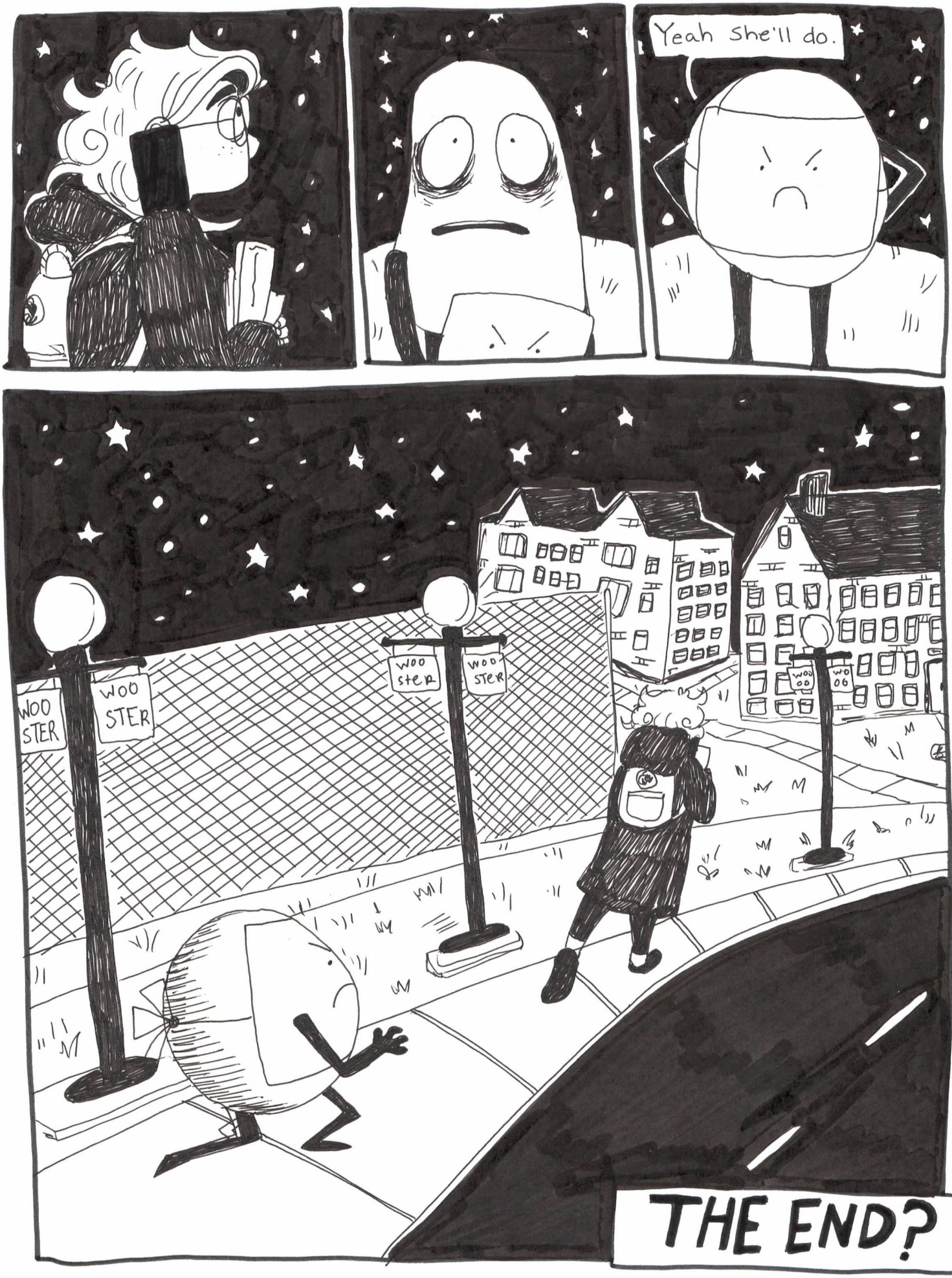

SLAM
26
:heave:
:heave:
WEEWOOO.
HOOONK
!
PHONEY BALONEY YYY
WHERE'D HE GO
AHHH
WEE WOO
SILLY TASK FORCE
omg ILY
CONFIDENCE!
WEEWOO
AHHH
HAPPY ZONE
ART SUPPLIES
YAY
Believe in Yourself


Believe in yourself
WEE WOO
PHOOOONEEYY BALONEEEYYY
BOOOOOOOO
PHONEY BALONEEEY
PHOOONEEY BALONEEY
PHFFFFFFFF
YAY FUUUUCKK
WEE WOO
PHONEEEEEEYYYY BALONEEEYY

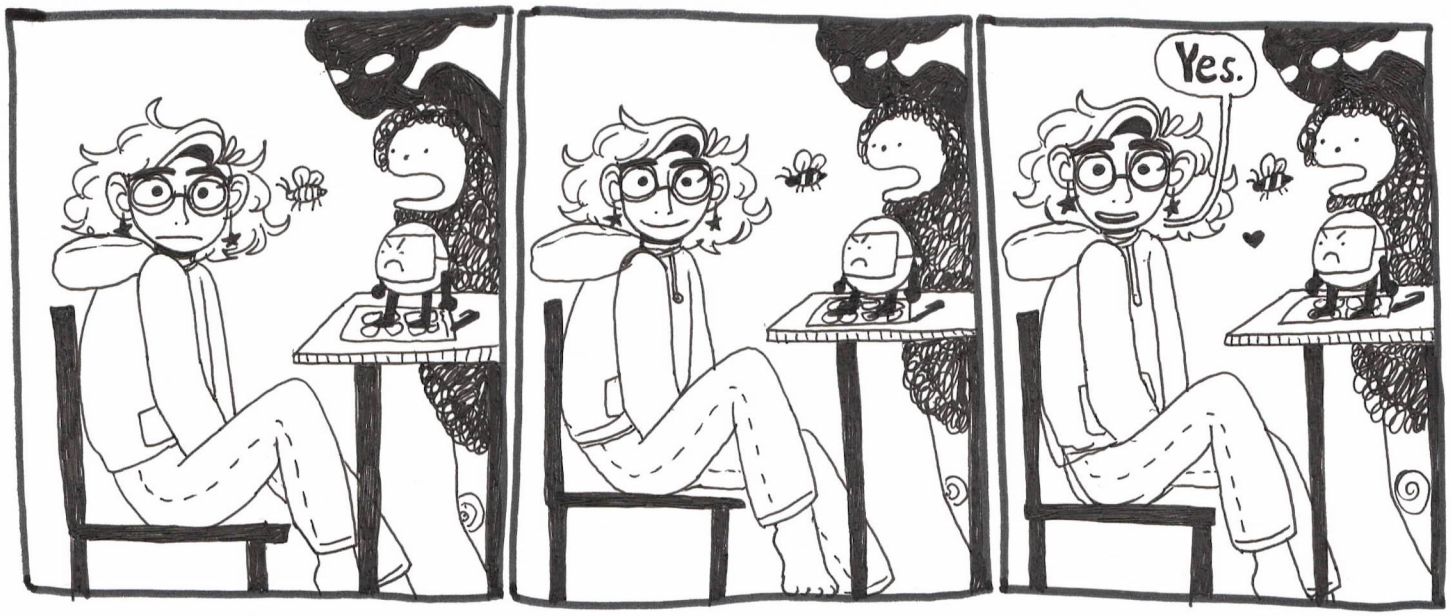

123 LAFF ST.
SILLY APARTMENTS
KICK!
WEE
FUCK YOU
SMILE
FUCK YOU,
gimme coffee :)
I ♥ YOU
SHOP
Silly Sale!
MAYOR: LIVE!
PHONEY BALONEY TASK FORCE UPDATE
And ESPECIALLY...
FUCK.
YOU.


Get out.
!
Go be gross somewhere else.
...FINE.
I DON'T NEED TO BE SILLY!
I NEVER DID!
Just go.
BOOO
BOOO
BOOO
BOO


MAYOR: LIVE!
BOOOOO
MAYOR: LIVE!
BALONEY
MUCH LATER...
GOD!
I'm so pissed. I want to find the first person I see and give them grief.
And never leave 'em alone.
HA
Yea, good one.... ha, really?


Yeah she'll do.
WOO STER
WOO STER
WOO STER
WOO STER
THE END?

♥ CONCLUSION: COMIX 4EVER


Yes.

Appendix – John Porcellino Interview

Samantha Green (SG): How are you doing today?

John Porcellino (JP): Pretty good. Got a lot of work done so far today, so—

SG: That's good.

JP: Feels good.

SG: Good. Do you have a Friday routine?

JP: Not really. Every day's the same. (laughs) Every once in a while to be more efficient or whatever, I try to set up weekly routines where on certain days I focus on certain things, but I always end up losing track of it and just kind of doing whatever.

SG: Yeah, yeah.

JP: Yeah, nothing special on Fridays right now.

SG: Gotcha, gotcha. Do you have anything exciting coming up for the rest of your day? Will you relax, will you lounge?

JP: (laughs) No, well—this morning I've been working on a commission drawing for some people… I'm doing a "save the date" card for a couple that's getting married.

SG: Oh, that's fun!

JP: So I've been kinda back and forth just with them, and this morning I just did the final black and white drawing, and this afternoon I'm gonna put some color on it, so I'm gonna work on that this afternoon, and then I'm kind of caught up—which, I'm usually never caught up, so it—I'm actually trying to take it easy a little. I usually work through most of the weekend, as well, but I think this weekend I'll have a chance to do some other stuff.

SG: Good. What will you do? What's your go-to, like, "I got free time! I'm gonna go do something for John!" What do you do?

JP: Oh, I like to get outside and hike and stuff, and I'm looking forward to playing some guitar again this weekend. I used to play in bands for a long time. But, it was a long time ago at this point, it was like 25 years ago, my ears got really damaged, so… I had to stop playing live music and stuff, but the last couple of years, I think my ears have improved enough that I'm able to play a little bit at home for my own enjoyment.

SG: Great.

JP: Yeah. So I have that for this weekend. I wanna play some guitar, and probably get outside. We have—I don't know where you're living, but I live in southern Wisconsin… it hasn't been a horrible winter, but it's been pretty gloomy and we got a lot of snow, but this weekend it's supposed to warm up quite a bit, so I'll probably try to get outside and work in the yard a little bit and clean stuff up and maybe try to get out for a walk.

SG: That sounds good. Yeah, I'm in Central Ohio, so this Midwestern winter is not what I'm usually prepared for… I've lived between Ohio and near Chicago my whole life so I'm used to the really brutal stuff.

JP: Oh, yeah.

SG: But this is… surprising.

JP: Yeah, no, it's been… it's been pretty mild this winter, so I can't really complain about it too much.

SG: Well, you can even get outside and play your guitar while you hike. You can just double up.

JP: (laughs) Sure. Sure, I'll multi-task.

SG: (laughs) Yeah. Well, I just wanted to say thank you so, so much again for talking to me. It really means a lot to me. I've been so… just so fulfilled. So, I told you in the email, I've been making comics for my—essentially my senior thesis, my undergrad.

JP: And I'm sorry, I can't remember, are you at CKAD in Columbus?

SG: No. I'm at the College of Wooster in Wooster.

JP: Oh, yeah, okay.

SG: Super, super teeny liberal arts school. So, every senior does—it's called an Independent Study, and it's required to graduate, and so you get a lot of freedom to kind of do what you want, especially in the English major, so they're just lettin' me go for it. They're letting me make comics and graduate with that, and it's been so incredibly fulfilling and your work has been a really big inspiration so far this year, so I am just so grateful for this chance to chat.

JP: Yeah, happy to.

SG: Yeah. I just wanted to reiterate, the chance to get to interview you is—it's mostly the importance of, like, conversation. I've been thinking about how much joy I've gotten from talking to like-minded people, and friends and family and otherwise, and just doing research and getting inspiration through conversation, so this is essentially all it is. I'm not gonna go down and write my critical introduction and say, "This is everything that John Porcellino taught me about comics—"

JP: Sure.

SG: It's—it's just a joyful opportunity for me to get some insight and chat, so it's super casual.

JP: Sounds good.

SG: Yeah. Uh, so we can start with one of the questions that I put in the email if that's cool with you.

JP: Yup.

SG: Awesome. Was there any question in there that you connected with the most that you wanna start with?

JP: (laughs) Yeah, no offense, don't take this personally, but I can't remember what the questions are. (laughs) I saw that they were really good, and I thought that, "Oh, this could be a good conversation." And I mentioned that my brain doesn't work as well as it did when I was younger, so it's sometimes a little hard for me to put my thoughts together, but yeah, my memory is not so great. So I actually don't remember the questions. I just remember that they were really good, thoughtful questions. (laughs) So, go ahead and ask all of them or whatever you want and I'll, uh, be happy to answer 'em.

SG: Yeah, no worries. And no rush, no pressure on the questions.

JP: Oh, sure. (laughs)

SG: I imagine I'm also pretty scattered because this is exciting, and I also don't know where to start, so I figured that things would just come out through conversation, so—

JP: Yeah.

SG: I have a fun [question] that I came up with last night; I'll start with that one. Can you think of—what was the last thing to happen to you where you thought, "Oh, I need to make a comic about that" ?

JP: Mmm.

SG: Like, how often does that happen to you?

JP: Well, it happens quite often. Um… Maybe a little bit less so just as my life has slowed down. Like I said, I played in bands, and I was doin' all kinds of stuff and involved in a lot of activities, and I was travelin' around the country and doin' all kinds of stuff on the spur of the moment, and so I—when I was younger I (laughs) had a lot more stuff to write about. So nowadays my life—I just kind of am at home most of the time. I live in a fairly small town with my girlfriend. We've got a bunch of pets. My life revolves around drawing, working on projects. I run a little distribution company for small-press comics, so I work a lot just packing orders and taking care of business stuff. So what happens nowadays—every once in a while—I'm trying to think of what the last one is. I should look, I probably have it written down here. In fact, I have my list here, hang on. (reaches for list) See, my memory is so bad that I have to write stuff down immediately now or I never remember it. Um… let's see here. Oh, yeah! I had a comic that I was doing. There was a little period—it lasted only like 4 months—about this time last year where I was doing a weekly strip for the *Chicago Reader*, which is the local alternative news weekly, and it was called *Prairie Pothole*, and it was really fun to do. And like most things involved with alternative news weeklies, it didn't last very long. But I had kept drawing them because I had so many ideas for them, so it was kind of a bummer when—and they cancelled all the comics in the whole newspaper—but I still had a ton of ideas, and I kept having new ideas, so the last thing I wrote down was… I'm gonna do a *Prairie Pothole* strip and collect those probably later in the year, but I've been posting them to my Patreon for people who sign up for that. It was a story about getting my hair cut when I was probably 12 or 13. I was kind of a dork, and my mom wanted me to get a haircut, so we drove down to the weird haircutting place in the strip mall in the Chicago suburbs, and when the woman asked me what I wanted her to do with my hair, I pulled out the inner sleeve of *Zenyatta Mondatta* by The Police and showed her a picture of Sting. Had like, cool spiky hair and stuff, you know. And asked her to make me look like Sting. I have that on my list.

SG: Would you say she pulled it off pretty well?

JP: Uh… (laughs) I'm guessing that Sting's hairdresser probably did a better job at it for him.

SG: (laughs) Sure.

JP: But yeah, you know, it was pretty cool for the time so… I'll think of stuff like that, and I have to write it down immediately and nowadays I keep a list on my phone of story ideas, and every couple weeks or so I transfer that list into my notebook 'cause I need to have a physical record of it. I used to have a much better—I have a really good long-term memory still, but my short-term memory is

really frighteningly shot. So it's really painful to like wake up and think, "Oh, last night at 3 a.m. I woke up for a second and I thought of this really great comic and—what was it?! It was so good!" So I tend to write on a little scrap paper on my—I keep a little notepad next to the bed, and I'll write on that. Or I keep a notepad in the car, too, so when ideas pop up I write 'em down right away. Otherwise they kinda get lost. Eventually they'll pop up again, something will remind me of the story again, and I'll be like, "Oh yeah, that's what that story was!" Sorry that's a long-winded answer, but next thing I'm gonna do, and maybe I'll do it this weekend for fun, is draw that *Prairie Pothole* strip and post it to my Patreon page.

SG: Yeah, that'd be great. I think keeping a list of like ongoing ideas just as they come to you is so good, and it's something I only recently started to do with this project. This is the first time in my life where I've ever seriously committed to regularly making comics; it's something I've done my whole life, since I was a kid. But now that it is a requirement, it's just constantly in my mind, so I'm constantly thinking of what's happening to me in terms of comics. So keeping that running list is so helpful, because when I feel like the momentum [is gone] when I sit down the work, I have a whole list of things to choose from.

JP: Yes! Exactly. And I do that, too. When I do an issue of *King-Cat*, there's usually some kind of thematic component, even if it's so obscure that I'm the only one who recognizes it. And so there'll be certain stories that I have or that I do or that I'm working on a little bit that tend not to fit that particular issue, and so I'll kind of backburner them. But I do have like running list of story ideas that I turn to when… like, this last issue that I made, I miscounted so… when you do a zine, as you may know, it needs to—the page count needs to be a multiple of four. 'Cuz each sheet of paper double-sided gives you four pages, or when you make 'em the way I do, digest size. And, you know, I was one page short because I forgot to count the back— I counted the back cover twice or something like that. And so then I'll turn to my notebooks and kind of flip through and look at those story lists and kind of be like, "Okay, what can I glean from this to fill one more page?" You know? Yeah, it's a great way to do it. Oftentimes I'll have a larger project that I'm working on, and… to kinda keep from getting burned out with stuff, I'll kind of alternate between that and little shorter strips or little projects, and so having a list like that, that you can turn to that's just like, "Well, okay! Here's what I'm gonna do today," and even if you just kind of put your finger down on the page and pick one, you know, it gives you something to keep moving.

SG: That's, yeah. Movement—momentum—is my buzzword…

JP: Yeah, it's really important. I mean, it's hard… for me, it's really hard, because I'm like a master procrastinator, but um… if I can get a couple days in a row of getting a lot of work done, then it's easier to kind of keep that ball rolling. So that's… um… last year was just a really rough year. We had all sorts of family problems and health problems and stuff like that, and it was super depressing, and

I have a tendency to shut down when I'm depressed, so I didn't get a lot of work done last year. And uh… you know… kind of around November or so I realized, I know how to break out of the cycle, and one of the really important things to do for me personally is just keep working consistently, even if you don't feel like it or even if it feels pointless, to kind of get yourself out and sit down and get that list out and start at the top and do this stuff, and once you get that ball rolling, once I get that ball rolling, then everything seems to lighten up and feel a little bit more positive, so…

SG: Oh, yeah, absolutely. Because it's, um, sitting down and the process of drawing anything—but for me especially sitting down and making a comic—it's a very… it's almost like a meditative sort of practice.

JP: For sure. Yup.

SG: Because, you know, you're focusing on detail, drawing details, multiple times, so at some point I—this is my experience with it—I like fall into this um kind of flow state where I'm not really—I'm not really thinking as I'm drawing, because I'm just becoming so familiar with drawing the same things again. It's just… I dunno. It's just a very special physical process, so it… it totally makes sense that it, you know, helps to calm the mind.

JP: Yes. It's very true. I mean, any kind of practice that you have that helps you lose track of that sense of self, you know… that kind of self-awareness where you can get past that a little bit and just *be*, you know? And it can be drawing, like you said, or for me it's playing music, or, you know, athletes will talk about that all the time, getting in the zone or whatever, where you just stop—you're just doing and being, you're not thinking about it or questioning it or second guessing yourself or anything… it just kind of flows out of you. And that's such a special feeling, and I do think it's very healing…. it's an important feeling. I wish everybody had something like that that they could get into.

SG: Absolutely, yeah. I definitely feel like I've tapped into something special by starting this project. And I was talking to my advisor the other day about how it just—it feels like, by doing this, not only just thinking about the stories and, you know, diving more into the minicomic and zine world, but also just the physical practice of doing it… I feel like there's part of me that has been dormant for a while that almost feels like it's waking up, like I just feel so—I feel so good and happy to be doing it. So… it's just a very, very special feeling.

JP: Yeah… The way I was raised was not very encouraging towards being an artist or being creative, and I have a lot of hang-ups about it. It's funny, because the second that I sit down and pick up the pencil and start drawing or working on comics or whatever I'm working on… I know without a doubt, deep inside this is what I was meant to do with my life. And it's so fulfilling, it feels so right, and it feels so comfortable. Even though it's difficult at times—you know, it's not like

it's just a cakewalk—I just feel this certainty that this is what I was born to do, but then I have to fight these kinds of voices that push me away from that…. and it's almost like as soon as I put the pencil down, I forget all that. I forget that feeling—the feeling fades so quickly. And I tell myself, like, "Okay, you're gonna be done now. You're gonna put your pencil down, you're gonna do it. But you have to remember this feeling. This feeling is so true, and so real, and so powerful… Remember this. And remember how good it is for you to get into this place, and… get right back into it." And that's where the momentum comes for me. If something comes up that throws that momentum off, it can really screw me up because I have so many psychological blocks to making creative work that any time there's a little crack that appears that those voices or feelings can sneak into, it can be tough for me to get it going again, so… for me, it's even if I just do a little bit a day. You know? It doesn't have to be hours and hours of work per day, but even if I can get a page drawn or tweak something or get a little bit of progress going on whatever I'm working on, it helps me to carry over that feeling.

SG: Oh yeah. Definitely. A book I read a while ago… *What I Talk About When I Talk About Running* by Haruki Murakami… an idea in there is just what you're saying, and it has stuck with me ever since I read it, like, two years ago. It's the idea that, both in writing and running, ideally, you're supposed to work until the point where you know exactly what you're going to do next, and then you stop, and you save it for the next day.

JP: Yeah!

SG: So that when you sit down at the desk or you put on your running shoes the next day, you know exactly where to go, and that helps you carry that momentum forward.

JP: I've never read that book and I've never heard it phrased that way, but that's something that I kind of fell into myself where, you know, I'm also obsessive compulsive, so sometimes I have a tendency like I'll go for months without drawing and then, well, I'll sit down and I'll draw for fourteen hours a day for a week straight or something, and that almost is just as bad because, especially… I have terrible posture, so I get physical aches and pains, I'm totally sore, my eyes are bugging out, and what I try to do is have some balance now—I do work at home, so I have the flexibility to do this—but my schedule per day is, I'll get up in the morning, have breakfast, have some coffee, and get to work, and I'll work through the day, and then in the late afternoon, I pack up all my stuff, and I go to the post office and mail stuff out and pick up whatever mail is there, and then I try to let that be the end of my work day. And I try to keep that consciously in mind… I'll look back a little bit and say, "okay—look, this is what I accomplished today. I got this done and I got this done and I got this done, the next thing on the list is this, so tomorrow when you get up, you don't have to think about it. You don't have to wonder about it, you know where you're gonna pick the ball up again tomorrow, and it's waiting for you. It's ready for you." And

it is a huge help for me, just some sort of weird psychological motivation to have… even just that inkling of a plan in mind. That's wonderful.

SG: Yeah. (laughs) I'm looking at my notes right now, and a couple weeks ago I did exactly what we're talking about. I made myself a diagram, because I was imagining what we're talking about in a cycle of how, the night before, I'll usually draw in the panels of the page I'm gonna work on the next day, and I'll have the script or the draft written so that, when I sit down, I already know exactly what needs to be done, I just need to start drawing it, so… the part of process that is usually the hardest to tap into, I've already done it for myself, when the momentum has already been built up from the day before, you know?

JP: Yeah.

SG: Yeah. It's… (laughs) it's so important. For such a wonderfully creative practice, like drawing and making comics, making those limits for yourself, you know, only helps you and only frees up your creativity more because, you know…

JP: Sure. And, you know, I have a tendency to just be overwhelmed and… I mean, the one thing that is kind of sad but true about making your living as an artist is that you kind of have to have a half dozen projects going at any given time, because each one of 'em pays so little… it's so easy for me to just get overwhelmed and kind of paralyzed by that pressure, and so having, like you said before with your list of things… "Okay if you're a little bit stuck, pull that thing out and pick something off of it and work on that for a while," or having that kind of set thing where [you say], "okay, here's what I did today, and before I stop, I'm gonna take a moment and think, what am I gonna do tomorrow? Where am I gonna pick this up again tomorrow?" And that little bit of work at the end of the day really makes it easier to get going again.

SG: Yeah. It just sets you up for success.

JP: Mhmm.

SG: That's awesome… so one of the questions I was most excited to ask you was the one about the overlap between comics and mindfulness, and thinking about how it changes the way we see the world. The first works of yours that I read were ones that my school library had, so I read *From Lone Mountain* first. And I noticed in that collection, to me, a major theme of it was mindfulness and connecting with the physical world around you, and I know that you also worked on *Thoreau at Walden*, which me and my Dad both really loved…

JP: Thank you.

SG: … so I was just curious if that is something you could speak to at all. Just how the practice of making comics, since you started… how it has influenced the way you interact with the physical world around you, and just with your life… if it has changed it at all. Does that make sense?

JP: Sure. Well, for me… from very early on, the two things were kind of intertwined, and probably early on I didn't have the words to articulate what was going on or what my goals were, [or what] my hopes were with my work. But from very, very early on I was always doing a lot of creative work. And so I… I'll be writing poetry or writing essays or painting or making comics or making music, and the thread through that all, even from very early on when I was young, was kind of a sense of… I wanna say wonder, but I don't know if that's really the right word. "Wonder" has a connotation of being like, "Oh! Isn't everything wonderful? It's so glorious." But wonder maybe in a raw-er [sic] sense where it's questioning things. You know? Observing things, and trying to understand them, and trying to give in to them… and sometimes those things are really wonderful in the sense of, "God, this is great," and sometimes they're terrible. But observing these things and coming to some sort of understanding… what I used to say was that I'm interested in real life, which was this idea that I had of looking at my life and the lives of others, but obviously, for me, it's this particular personal perspective that I have… I'm looking out through my eyes and [wondering], what is that experience like? But looking at it and trying to chip away at all the layers that we put on those things to get to some kind of fundamental understanding. To break away the distractions and the confusion and the extra stuff to get down to some kind of essence. And that was kind of the motivation in my work from very early on, and at some point in the mid-90s I started getting interested in Eastern religion, so I studied Hinduism really seriously and Buddhism, and I eventually ended up on the path of Zen Buddhism, and when I found it, it was like this kind of mindfulness, this kind of awareness—and there's all kinds of terms you could use for it—one of the terms that I like a lot is "non-discriminatory awareness—"

SG: I like that a lot.

JP: Yeah. It's not apathy, but it's more like… "Okay, let's be aware of what's happening without throwing a bunch of slop all over it…. and see [what's] really going on here." And so there's all those kinds of practices that, when I found them, clarified for me what I was doing as an artist but also as a human being… that's the stuff that fascinated me from the time I was really young, right? I just didn't have the words for it. I didn't know how to express it, or it was always there, but like a shadow. So Zen helped me a lot in terms of… it gave me some focus, you know…. The way I always describe it is, when I was young I was trying to make my way through the brambly woods and getting hung up on branches and pulled and stuff, and I'm still goin' and I'm doing all right, but eventually I step out, and there was another path there, and I was able to move through this stuff with greater ease, and… the path is there because people have made that path. That's kind of how I felt when I found that in my life and started

making Zen… [focusing] on making it a serious practice in my life. It kind of helped me articulate these feelings and this movement that I had felt in my life [for] as long as I can remember. But I just didn't have words for [it], or was just kind of directionless. And it kind of helped me focus then on what I saw I was doing in my life. It's a practice that's involved with everyday life. You know, there's nothing special, you don't have to go anywhere special or do anything special… it's the idea that you become aware of what's happening at any given moment, and so at some point all this—it all just became intertwined together. I don't think of drawing comics or practicing Zen or doing the dishes or driving so much as distinct practices in my life or distinct aspects of my life. They're just—it's all my life, you know? And at this point, when I'm working on *King-Cat* or working on comics, um… it's just kinda… ah, I don't know how to put it in words… like I said, I guess. It's just one thing, my life is just flowing, and I just try to be aware with it and stay with that and move with it. I guess that's the long version, but I feel like this kind of mindful practice or awareness is something that was kind of naturally a part of my life from very early on, and at some point I found out that, "Hey, this is a thing that people have done for thousands of years that help them, and these people for thousands of years have [had] the same kinds of questions that I've had since I was a little kid, and the same kinds of concerns, and this practice helped them." And so it became a big part of my life.

SG: That's a great answer.

JP: Okay. (laughs)

SG: (laughs) No, that was really great. So many of the things that you said speak to so much of what I'm thinking about. So I'm gonna try to formulate a good response. I really liked what you said about the idea of Zen always being there, but like a shadow. I like that a lot and I wrote it down, because I've been thinking about how the things that really matter the most to us have always been there, right? And why they're placed there in the first place, I'm not sure, that is a question that is probably beyond me. But I've just been thinking a lot about how we become friends again and rediscover those things that are at our core and that have always been there. So that's great, and that'll be a great Segway into the next question that I'll ask you in a second. But I also like what you said about tapping into an awareness of what humans have always done. That's something I think about, too, with comics. Sometimes I sit down and it feels so good, like we said, to sit down and do that practice and to think about making these stories, but sometimes—and I don't know if you still think this—but I sit down and I think, "Okay, but why comics? Why should the practice that feels so good to me be comics?" In some way, it taps into something very innately human, I think. Communicating the world not only through stories but through pictures and… I guess this is coming from just having recently read *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud, but understanding the world through images, through sequential pictures, is something that, for some reason, is so specifically human down to its core.

JP: Absolutely. I was gonna say, I don't know if you've ever read any of Lynda Barry's books, not just her comics, but her new one is called *Making Comics*, based on her workshops. I mean, this is something that is a core, hardcore way she approaches it. That there's something essentially human about telling stories in this way, and there's something essentially, deeply human—specifically human—about making pictures and using pictures to tell stories. If you haven't read that stuff, I think you would get a lot out of her. I mean, her comics are great, but she's recently done a lot of work about comics that I think you might find really valuable.

SG: Yeah. It's funny that you mention Lynda Barry. I love Lynda Barry a lot, and for the critical introduction that I'm doing for this project, I think I decided that I'm gonna frame the argument of the paper around two case studies, and I think the cases studies are gonna be you and Lynda Barry. So… (laughs) that's really wonderful.

JP: Yeah, she's a remarkable person. I actually live about twenty minutes from her. And she lives in an old farm in a really, really small town a little bit northwest of where I'm at. She teaches at the University of Wisconsin, and every once in a while I get to go in, and I'll guest-teach one of her classes or kind of sit in at her classes there, and it's remarkable. One of the first times I saw her talk was quite a while ago, and she was sitting on a panel, and it was all these amazing comic luminaries, like R. Crumb and Alison Bechdel and Chris Ware and, I think Charles Burns was there, and all these people, she [Lynda Barry] said she's sitting here with these amazing people, and people are there listening to her talk and all this stuff, and the whole reason it's there is because she drew little pictures on paper.

SG: (laughs)

JP: She was one of the prime influences in my early years of high school. In the *Chicago Reader* that I mentioned earlier, they ran her comic. They ran Matt Groening, he [did a strip that was called] *Life in Hell*, and those were my two big influences when I saw them, [when I was] drawing comics when I was a kid. When I saw those two comics, that's what kind of blew my mind open. "Wow, comics can do all kinds of stuff, you know?" When I was in high school, I'd cut [Barry's] comics out of the *Chicago Reader and* tape 'em to the inside of my locker at school, you know? And every once in a while I'll be sitting with her talking about comics, and it's just exactly what she said. Because I sat down and drew little pictures on paper, my life has led me to the point where I'm sitting with the person whose comics I cut out when I was fourteen years old, and we're sitting at a table eating falafel together. (laughs)

SG: (laughs)

JP: This is gonna be a little bit of a tangent, but I just wanna say it while it's on my mind. For me, so much of what I do and why I do it—the motivation for me is just to connect with people. And comics is a way of connecting with people I found that I felt much more comfortable with than other methods. And I think comics are a really good way of communicating and sharing ideas, and I look at comics as a community, and my readers are community. Just to do it puts you into this world where there are so many cool people. And, I don't know, I'm kind of off the track there a little bit, but I realized at some point that this is why I do it. It's because I had something that I wanted to say and I wanted to share it with people, but I wanted to do it in a way that felt comfortable for me, because—especially when I was young, [I was] extremely, almost like pathologically shy, no self-esteem… but somehow making comics or little zines was like my entryway into being able to express myself in a more comfortable. And you do it for so many years, day in and day out, and you can kind of lose track of those core things. And especially lately as I've gotten a little bit older, that aspect of my work has come to fore, where the reason I am doing this is not to be a great cartoonist or draw funny pictures of tell sad stories or whatever—it's that I just wanna connect with people. I wanna have a connection with people. And comics, and especially self-publishing zines and stuff, the way I do it, it allows for a connection that's really personal, and it's a two-way connection. It's not just sitting there and putting these stories out into the universe and people read them… It's putting these things out into the universe in hope that they're going to engender some kind of feedback and some kind of conversation that lifts off from that gesture and kind of carries you forward and creates relationships and connections. I'll stop blathering now, but that popped into my head…

SG: No, I'm glad you said it. That could not be further from blathering, because you recited back everything I care about so that was really—thank you for saying it. That was great.

JP: Sure.

SG: That's something I've been thinking about a lot, because sharing my comics with people is new to me. I've made them for a while but, you know, it's weird to start sharing your work with people. But it's new to me and I've been finding so much joy in it… it has been shocking to me how it resonates with people.

JP: Yup.

SG: I didn't expect people to respond to it like they're responding to it, and it feels so good. I had a friend tell me that it feels healing to read some of the things I'm writing about, and it's a bit of an ego booster which is fun, but it's also really, really fulfilling to sit back and think, "Wow, these thoughts that I have and that I'm channeling into these fun cartoons… there's truth to them. There's something truthful to them, and it resonates with people and that's really important." And it

feels really good to know that I can do this sort of thing. So that's been a mind-blowing discovery on my end.

JP: That's wonderful. I guess it was about ten years ago now, twelve years ago, [that] a book of mine came out called *Map of My Heart*, and it was stories that came out during one of the really rough times in my life. I had always had depression and anxiety growing up, and I went through a series of really severe health crises, and one of the—the fallout from that was the kind of anxiety I had—it was kind of come and go and turned into like full-on OCD, and I was always able in my comics and music to kind of address the sad part of it—the depression part of it—but the anxiety part of it, and then the OCD part of it, was so crippling to me and so frightening to me that it was really hard for me to find a way to express that stuff in my work. And so, in any case, that particular book of mine collected stories that were done during this first period where I was having really intense OCD, and in the comics I would find ways to skirt around it and use little poetic allusions to kind of give a hint that I was suffering with these kinds of things or struggling so much, but I never would be able to come out really directly and talk about it. When I was putting that book together—I usually put notes in the back where I give information—I realized, "it's time for me to address this a little bit." So in the notes to that book, I started talking more openly about OCD, the anxiety, and the ways it had kind of crippled my life, and when I went out on the book tour for that book, I just started talking openly about this stuff and, first of all, it was so liberating to just be honest… not that I was dishonest [before], but I was embarrassed—I was ashamed—of my illness, and I spent a lot of energy trying to keep it [in], and to just go on the book tour and talk to a group of people and just be completely straight-up about what was going on when I was making these comics… it was so freeing, and I found that the more I was able to talk freely about this stuff, the looser the grip it had on my life became. It was a way of standing up to this illness. So there was not only that personal benefit, but on that tour, every stop that I made afterwards when I'd sign books, every single time, people would come up to me—more than one person would come up to me—and say thank you for talking about that so openly, because… [they'd say], "I have OCD and it's wrecked my life and I've been so ashamed and I don't know how to address it, I don't know how to talk about it with people," or they'll say, "My mom has OCD or really bad anxiety…" "…my girlfriend has really bad anxiety…" or whatever it was, and I just realized there was such a hunger to have an open conversation about this stuff. So, what you're feeling, I think, is very, very true. It's very real, and I think it's really important. To be able to write openly about your struggles not only, I think, is gonna help you in the long run, but it opens up these doors with so many other people you know? And it helps destigmatize the conversation, and it helps people gain, even if nothing but commiserating with someone else who has these kinds of problems, so I think it's very, very real. I think it's very true, and that book tour was a turning point for me. And that's kind of when I really realized, "Oh yeah! That's why" – and you know I had been drawing comics for twenty years at this point, doing *King-Cat* for 20 years – and it was almost like I had kind of forgot… "Oh yeah! The reason

I do this is because I love people, and I wanna share things with people, and I want them to share things with me. You know? I wanna have a connection with people." And it was just… life-changing. You know? And since that time, it's been more of a conscious focus to my work, the way that this artwork creates a community of people around it. And it's very fulfilling, and that's what I was looking for when I started out and I didn't know what I was doing and I didn't know why I was doing it, but that's what I was doing to kind of break out of this shell that I had locked myself into, and it's the most important thing in my life, you know? It's just a really powerful thing.

SG: Yeah. Absolutely.

JP: Sorry, I'm gettin' all weepy here.

SG: That's okay! Uh thank you for being open to talking about things that make you weepy.

JP: (laughing) I'm half-joking.

SG: Yeah. That's so amazing. I'm sitting here smiling because it's just so great to talk about this, and to hear about things that matter so much to me, so thank you. This is really special.

JP: Sure.

SG: One thing I thought about while you were talking is how it is kind of special how making comics specifically helps make me almost invincible against my anxiety and depression, because it's such a great form of processing, because it takes these things that we cannot see, you know, and it makes them tangible. When I'm making a comic about the anxiety character—his name is Fuzzball—when I'm making comics with that character, it is giving my anxiety a form, and it allowing me to sit down, and in the comic I can look at him, I can see him, and that makes it easier to kind of "talk to him" and process it. Giving it a voice, making it say really stupid things, is cathartic and just—I think it's really great for me, but I think that's also just a power that comics has and why it resonates with others. I don't know. It's magical. I think it's magical.

JP: Yup. Yes, it is. And it's definitely therapeutic. In just the literal sense, I think making art or doing these things in general, depends on what your practice is and our practice ends up being comics, so that's the form it takes, but it's literally therapy to do it… I've been in talk therapy where they've said, "Okay, what does you anxiety look like? Can you give it a name? Can you draw a picture of what your anxiety looks like?" You know? It's literally like a therapeutic technique. But I've done autobiographical comics at this point for 35 years or something, and it gives me the opportunity to process that stuff and put it on paper and also start to see patterns in your life and notice, "Wait a minute, I'm doing the same things

that I did 20 years ago," and… [I think about] how can I have learned from this opportunity to change something… It's very helpful, I think.

SG: Yeah, and there is nothing that we cannot make a comic about, which I think is a really important element, too.

JP: That exactly was a huge realization that I had early on. "I can draw anything."

SG: Yeah!

JP: If you can imagine it—even if you can't imagine it—you can still draw it. You can just sit down and start to draw it, and it appears before you.

SG: Absolutely. And that is so helpful for me too, because even when I'm sitting [to make] comics about mental health, everything is material! Everything is content! So even if I'm sitting there making a comic and I start to have really intense imposter syndrome thoughts like, "I can't make a comic" or "I'm faking this depressive thought, I'm faking this feeling, I'm making it all up"—those really invasive thoughts—even when those come, I just turn around and I can make a comic about them. It is just such a useful tool to capture the cycling thoughts and for me to be able to take a step back. That's really helpful for me too.

(pause)

SG: I was wondering… about your first days making *King-Cat*. If you can recall, can you think back to feelings of what it was like to start making your own zines and to start exploring the world of it, navigating the process of it? The other day I was trying to run my stuff through a copier and trying to figure out the format of printing things and adjusting the style, and it's a bit of a headache… Can you think about what feelings you had back in those days, what encouraged you the most…? We can start there.

JP: Sure. When I think about it, when I was young, I was always writing and I was always drawing and I was always making little books and stuff, just handmade, one-of-a-kind things where I'd take paper and fold it in half and glue the edges together, to make a spine and stuff. This would have been like late 70s, early 80s for me. My dad got a photocopier—my dad was a lawyer and he worked downtown Chicago and he had a big office, a skyscraper with a bunch of other lawyers and stuff, and I used to go with him on Saturdays when he'd go in to do extra work on the weekend. And I was obsessed with this copy machine. I'd copy my hand, and I'd do drawings and make photocopies of the drawings and stuff. And it was this epiphany moment where I thought, "I can take those books that I make and make photo copies of them. And I could like give 'em to my friends and stuff." And so I did that for quite a while, and it wasn't really until almost seven or eight years later that I realized that there were people all over the world

that did this sort of thing, and it was called the zine world, and there were these self-publishers making [zines], whether they were comics or music magazines or poetry magazines. There was this massive network of self-publishers. When I found that world, that's when I found my home. I was like, "Wow, this combines everything that I'm interested in." It's writing and it's drawing and it's making little books, and it's sharing things with people. It was a huge thing for me… obviously I've never looked back. I still do the books and stuff, and I'm so grateful for them, because they get them into places like your school library, and otherwise my comics wouldn't. But it's really clear to me that my zines—*King-Cat*—is what I think about. That's my art, and that's my focus. It just fulfills all those interests of mine in one handy package, you know? But I remember certain things. My first zines were just drawn on 8.5 x 11 sheets of paper, and I'd print 'em and stack 'em up and put one staple up in the top left corner like a school report or something like that. And I remember sitting there thinking, "I could take those pages and reduce them 50% and turn them sideways and put four pages on one double-sided 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper and fold it in half and put a staple in it!" I mean, that's really obvious, right? It's called a booklet. But I remember having that thought and being like, "My God! I could get twice the amount of pages for the same amount of money." You know what I mean? And it was almost like I had to run in the streets and tell people, "Did you know that you can make a little booklet? And you can photocopy it?" And I remember things like that. You know, there's long-reach staplers or there's saddle-stitchers where you can put the staple into the spine of the booklet or whatever. And I didn't know about that stuff! So I would make my little books and fold 'em up, and then I had a big piece of Styrofoam, and I would take my stapler—and it was one of those staplers that came open on a hinge so you could use it to staple something to a bulletin board—and I would put the folded zine on the Styrofoam, and I'd take the open stapler and I'd push it through the paper into the Styrofoam, and then I'm flip the zine over and with my thumbs I would bend the staples closed.

SG: Whoa… that's kind of genius.

JP: Well, but I did it for years and years, 'cuz I didn't know how you were supposed to do it! And one day I was at Office Max or whatever it was back then, and my girlfriend at the time was like, "I know what I'm getting you for your birthday." And she bought me a long reach stapler, and I had no idea such a thing existed. I had no idea how they put staples inside of things. It was pretty innocent days back then.

SG: I've been doing some research on zine-making and constructing and, you know, "best sizes to print" and "which stapler should you buy?" and at some point I just closed my laptop and I thought, "I can't do all this research. I just need to figure it out. I just need to start making things, and figure out what works for me, and just figure it out as I go."

JP: Mhmm.

SG: So maybe I'll get a block of Styrofoam.

JP: (laughs) Well, if you do that, find something to put on your thumbs, because it's really painful.

SG: Noted. Can you remember any influential figures or people that you met back in those early days when you started *King-Cat* that you connected with and who helped you feel encouraged? When would you say that you first started to find that real sense of community in the zine world?

JP: Well, I can tell you exactly when it was. After high school when I went to college, I went to NIU University and studied art. I was gonna get a painting degree. I was doing my zines and stuff, and there was a little punk rock record store, and they had a magazine rack. At the time I was doing a little magazine called *Cehsoikoe* that was art and poetry, and there were some comics in it, and people would contribute photographs or poems or things like that, and I'd put 'em together and publish this little art journal magazine. And I took some into this record store and put 'em on the rack, and I got a letter from this girl in the mail and it said, "I'm Laine D'Oyster." And she sent a copy of her own little magazine that was essentially the same kind of thing. It was a different format, but it was writing from her and her friends, and some drawings and photographs and little essays and poetry and stuff like that, and it blew my mind that somebody else was doing this. I didn't know that other people did this. She lived a couple towns over, and I went to go visit her, and that's when she showed me *Factsheet Five*. If you've looked into the history of zines, I'm sure people have mentioned it many times. But it was a magazine that came out every couple months, and it just listed hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of zines from all over the world, and it would give a little description and an address to write to, and [you'd] send some stamps or a dollar in the mail to get it, and so Laine showed me that magazine. I had no idea that that world existed. I had no idea that there were like people all over the country and all over the world, sharing them through the mail and stuff like that. And it just changed everything for me you know? I think about Laine—she was super, super important for me. We're still friends. And that's the thing that is probably true when you talk about people… when I started making comics like *King-Cat*—and this is possibly a slight exaggeration, but I actually don't think it's that much of an exaggeration—I think there were maybe ten people in the country making what you would call alternative comics, that weren't superhero comics. That maybe were art comics. Comics that were a little more artful, a little more literary, in their approach. There were people who were doing superhero comics, and there were people who were doing goofy satirical comics, but as far as people who were doing serious comics about their lives or poetic comics or quieter comics, or more thoughtful, gentle comics—not even gentle, because some of these cartoonists were really wild. We all knew each other eventually, but we all lived in different cities all over the country. So the only connection was through the mail. You couldn't even call people, because it was,

like, two dollars a minute to make a long-distance phone call. It was this real small, real intense community of like-minded people that… I have friends from those days and that world that are some of the best friends I've ever had in my life, and we've only met in person three or four times. You know? Nowadays with all the shows, travelling, and festivals, you see people more often, but even so… I was at CAKE last year, and this guy Jim—he's a postman in this very small town in Iowa on the Mississippi River, and he draws these crazy underground drawings and comics and makes zines and stuff. I've been writing to him since the mid-80s probably, and he came up to my table and introduced himself. We'd been writing for 30 years and I'd never met him before, you know? So there's that kinda community. All those people from back in those old days. And we would travel… I lived in Denver at the time, and a lot of people would come through Denver because it was halfway between San Francisco and Chicago, and people would just show up because they didn't have cell phones. They'd get to Denver, and they'd find a Yellow Pages phonebook and look up my name and call me, and be like, "Oh hey! It's Mr. Mike. I'm at the bus station." Those people are still some of my best friends of all time. Because we had that kind of connection long before we ever met in person. By the time you met in person, you didn't even know what they looked like, but you knew that they were like—you were best friends with them.

SG: Yeah, because think about the intentionality behind writing a letter, and especially behind sharing zines and comics. You get to know someone! You get to know someone very well.

JP: For sure. Yeah. It was before email and all that stuff, so you would actually write letters. You'd send out a zine and write a letter to your friend you'd never met and tell them what has been going on since the previous issue of your magazine. They'd send you back their latest thing, and you'd read what they were doing and see how they were growing or changing and their art was evolving. Everybody has their golden age. But I look back on that, and it was really special. It was a really unique time, you know? It's great now. It's so big. A couple of friends and I went out to the West Coast and traveled up the country from San Francisco to Vancouver, and I remember sitting in Seattle, which is the big hotspot for alternative comics, and you're sitting in a room and there are like, a dozen people who make comics and 80% in the whole country who do this kind of stuff are sitting in the same room! And now you go to something like SPX or CAKE and there's hundreds and hundreds of people exhibiting and thousands of visitors coming in and it's amazing, but it really changed a lot.

SG: Yeah, I bet.

JP: Yeah. I mean, it's great! But it's funny when I think back on those times. When I started making *King-Cat*, I'd make 18 copies. That was all you needed, you know? And 18 copies probably lasted me six months or a year or whenever I sold out of that print run, because there were so few people in that world.

SG: How do you feel like you've adapted to the way it is now? How often do you go to shows and things like that?

JP: Well, for a long time I was really ill, and so it was very difficult for me to travel. About the time that these larger shows like SPX started—I wanna say in like '95 or something—I started getting really sick in '95. I went to, like, one SPX, and it was, like, 15 years before I was able to go to another one. In the meantime, all these shows opened up. But there weren't so many shows or reasons to travel around, so once my health got better, I kinda went crazy and made up for lost time and [for] everything that I put out, I toured the country. I'd go anywhere where people would let me come in and do a reading. I did readings in Norman, Oklahoma. I did readings in Rapid City, and I did readings in Joshua Tree, California in the middle of the desert to a bunch of cowboys. I traveled so much, so nowadays, I'm kinda scaling back a bit. I think I was doing 18 shows a year for a while… and it got to be just exhausting. So I don't travel as much as I used to. One of the reasons I've moved back to the Midwest is to be centrally located. I kinda focus on the shows that are a half-day's drive from here. I go up to Minneapolis or St. Louis or Chicago or Columbus, maybe. That's about as far as I go nowadays. For many years there were just two shows. There was SPX on the East Coast and APE, the Alternative Press Expo, in San Francisco. APE was in the Spring and SPX was in the fall, and that's all there was. Every little town didn't have its own show. So it was a little bit easier to manage. I think it's great. I'm not saying like, "Oh it used to be better!" Certainly it's a total golden age. There are so many great cartoonists and great comics and great publishers now, that it's just kind of stunning to think back on the old days. None of the infrastructure really existed that does now, you know? There were cartoonists in little towns across the country, or cities across the country, copying their stuff and sending it through the mail, and that's what the infrastructure was. Shows started opening up, there started being more zine stores and comic shops that would carry that kind of stuff. For a long time, if you did like art comics, there was such a stigma against it, because the mainstream comics world hated that kind of stuff. It took a while to develop publishers that were interested in that kind of stuff and stores that would carry it and festivals that were more devoted to that kind of thing, and a readership, and so… it's just been a slow, steady progress.

SG: Nah, I didn't get the impression that you were saying, "Oh—the old days!"

JP: Yeah, I mean—it was fun! It was cool. And it was really personal, you know, because it was so small and everyone knew each other… it was just different.

SG: Yeah. Now that you mention it, earlier this year I read *My New York Diary* by Julie Doucet, and I do remember one of the pages, in one of the panels, she's opening mail from you. (laughs)

JP: (laughs)

SG: So I remember that.

JP: Yeah, that's how it was, you know?

SG: Mhmm. I think I probably just have an excitement that might be on the other side of the coin from you. Where you realized, "Wow, other people are doing this," for me it's an experience of… I've known that people do this. You know? Because [on] the Internet and social media, it's abundant. I think the excitement for me is sitting down and realizing, "Wow so many people do this… and so can I!"

JP: Yes! I will say that, as big as comics is now, it's still awfully small compared to other things. I've been involved in all kinds of cultural worlds. I've been involved in the music world and the art world, and the comics world is pretty great. I mean, there are people who are jerks, but they're pretty few and far between. Most cartoonists that you meet are gonna be pretty cool you know? They're gonna be nice people, and they're gonna be supportive people, and they're gonna be personable. The comics world is a pretty good place to make art in. I do think it's still small enough, that if you work hard, are a nice person, and have something unique to say, I think sooner or later people are going to realize it. And if you start going to the shows and start bringing your work around and showing it to people, you start building those relationships that are just really rewarding. I'm very glad that I ended up doing comics. I have friends that are musicians, and that world is just such a nightmare to try and navigate. It's so huge, and there are actual stakes at hand, so people are looking to get an advantage over someone or looking for opportunities and using people, and it's just terrible. Comics is still pretty lowkey and accessible and friendly and down to earth.

SG: That's really good to hear. That's encouraging. And I'm so excited to start meeting more people. I don't know a lot of people who make comics. I haven't been to a zine fest or anything. Part of what feels overwhelming about just starting out at the age I'm at is an exciting sort of overwhelming feeling, in that there's just this whole world that I haven't tapped into yet. There's a lot to learn, but nothing but time to learn it.

JP: Good.

SG: Yeah, it feels good. It's exciting. I wanna get out there.

JP: Good. I mean, what town are you in? Where are you in in Ohio?

SG: I live up near Cleveland, but my school is in Wooster, which is like an hour from Columbus.

JP: Okay, because Columbus—in the spring they have a show called SPACE, and in the fall they have CXC, which is amazing. And Cleveland—it's usually the weekend after Thanksgiving every year—they have Genghis Con. Have you ever been to that?

SG: I have not, but I've heard of it.

JP: Yeah, it's pretty fun. It's always kind of dicey weather, and it's always a holiday weekend, so I've only been a few times, but every year I wish I could go because I like Cleveland. It's fun to go up there. And CAKE in Chicago. I think CAKE is one of the best shows in the country. It's one that's still really focused on literary stuff and art stuff, and the quality of exhibitors is really high. Every table you go to is mind-blowing, so I would recommend that one if you have friends or something or wanna come out to Chicago. That's usually in June. I think it's like June 14th this year. That's what I always recommend when young cartoonists or people starting out ask. I say, "just make comics. Keep making them, and find people whose work you like, and get it to them." You know? A lot of people, for their first show, they won't even get a table. Just print up some copies of your comics and put 'em in a backpack and go to the show and walk around, and when you see stuff that seems up your alley or something, just give it to the people who are there, and you're gonna end up exchanging emails and stuff like that. That's what it is. It's a big community of people.

SG: I've heard about that practice, you know, of just being open and handing out your work and just being willing to trade and share and talk. When you first started doing that, did it make you nervous, and how did you push through that? Because the idea of holding one of my books out to someone whose work I admire and saying, "Read this!" makes my skin crawl a little bit.

JP: Well, the advantage of being a cartoonist is that almost all cartoonists feel that. You know? Even the most established, respected, biggest-name cartoonists, all of the ones that I know are somewhat insecure. It's incredible. So if you're in that position, the people you're handing your comic to were probably doing the same thing a few years earlier. You know what I mean? Some people will be grumpy or be jerks about it. I don't think anyone would be a jerk to you, like I don't think anyone would be like, "take your trashy magazine and get out of here"

SG: "Get that outta here."

JP: But it's kind of an unwritten thing in comics, you know? It certainly is in the zine world. You share this stuff and you trade stuff. If you go into it with a humble attitude and if you're like, "Ahh, I feel really funny doing this, but I really like your work, and I have a comic here and I would love for you to have a copy." I mean, you don't have to say, "Read it and love it and give me an essay about what you thought," or anything, but all you have to say is, "I really like your work, and it's really great to meet you, I'm a cartoonist too, and I brought some

copies of my stuff, and I'd love for you to have a copy." People will be gracious about it.

SG: That's good to hear. (laughs)

JP: You know, really. Seriously. Comic people for the most part, they're very, very good people.

SG: Good.

JP: Even if they were gonna afterwards pull your comic out of their box and be like, "What is this? This is horrible!" They wouldn't do it to your face. (laughs)

SG: I guess that's what really counts here.

JP: Yeah. You know, I'm being facetious. I still think that that's the best way to do it. 'Cuz it's just such a small world, and that's how you meet people, connect with people, and develop relationships and stuff. Cartoonists like comics.

SG: It's true. That's great, thank you so much for that.

JP: Yeah, you're welcome.

SG: I know we were talking earlier about childhood comics, and I was flipping through my copy of *King-Cat Classix* last night, and I know that in—I guess it was Issue 50—you showed a bit of your childhood comics, and I wanna ask you about those, because I think they're so fun to talk about. I have a basket of my childhood stuff sitting in my kitchen right now, because it's just a goldmine of inspiration, some of the things we come up with when we're kids and we have no filter. I was wondering if you could just tell me a bit more about what you remember about the comics you made as a kid, and if like any of the inspiration that you had from that stuff lasts to this day.

JP: Sure. When I started out making comics, I wasn't a comics person. A lot of cartoonists grew up reading comics and were obsessed with comics and *Spider-Man* or whatever. I wasn't really that kind. I mostly read the daily newspaper strips and stuff. I was really into like monster movies, *Godzilla* movies and stuff. So I would kind of draw out one of these monster stories, you know? And in some way… drawing the little panels was like drawing little TV screens or something.

SG: Mhmm, yeah.

JP: So when I was young I did those kinda things. When I was in junior high, I got really into the James Bond books, so I had a spy character that was really terrible, and I would draw it. But I would never show any of that stuff to people. The first comic that I made that I made copies of—and that's when I discovered

the photocopier machine in my dad's office—I did a comic called *Hogarth the Barbarian Pig,* and it was like a *Dungeons and Dragons* comic. But, like, silly. And that was the first one. I would do these drawings, do these pages, and then I'd give 'em to my dad, and he'd take 'em to work with him, and he'd come home and he'd made like 7 copies or something. I kept one for myself, and I think I gave one to my dad, and I had five friends at school that I would give 'em to. The one thing I will say is that my comics now—they're obviously much more refined, but they're not a whole lot different, honestly. I'm still doing the same thing that I was doing when I was ten years old; I draw a little square, I write some text in a box, and I draw a line under that, and then I draw a little oval with a nose and a line for a mouth and draw this little world bubble, and there's weirdly been kind of a consistency to them. Obviously I can draw better, and I'm better at making comics now than I was then, but I never was like, "this is trash and I can't draw! I really need to learn anatomy or learn to draw comics the Marvel way," or whatever happens to a lot of young cartoonists. I just kind of kept doing it. If you do anything for a long time, you just naturally become good at it. Or better at it. And you figure things out by trial and error. I mean, I haven't looked at those comics in a long, long time. But I'm a little bit worried that they'd be shockingly similar in style to what I draw now. (laughs)

SG: (laughs)

JP: But maybe a little bit more sloppy and haphazard.

SG: Sure. Well, I guess maybe that just taps back into the idea that what matters the most to us is with us all along, and what's right for us is with us all along, so maybe you'd find a carbon copy of [a comic] you made when you were a kid, but that's just because it's what at your core, and that's good.

JP: Yeah. I mean, I will say that, with my comics, and with most of the stuff that I did—creative stuff—I had a conscious decision early on that I just wanted to do what came natural, you know? I didn't wanna second-guess myself so much or fight myself so much. And part of that was when, early in my teen years, I discovered punk rock music. And that's a whole part of that whole essence—this raw unfiltered expression, and you don't worry about the mistakes… not only do you leave the mistakes in, but you take pride in the mistake. You take pride in the humanness of it, and the imperfections of it are part of what gives it it's power. And I kind of applied that kind of thinking, too, to my painting or my comics or my writing. I remember for whatever reason, even early on, when I started *King-Cat*, just thinking, "This comic doesn't have to be perfect. And I'm gonna just do it, and I'm going to put it out in the world, and maybe it will succeed, and maybe it won't succeed, but whether it succeeds or not, maybe I can learn something from the process. And the next one I draw maybe will be a little bit better, or maybe it'll be a little bit worse. And then I'll go from there and I'll try to figure out… like, okay, how come this one came out worse than I thought it would?" This is something I always say when I do workshops and talk to aspiring

cartoonists: “Don’t be afraid to fail.” Right? I know that sounds kind of clichéd, but… when I do workshops or something, people are so hung up. “I’ve been working on my comic for the past five years and I’ve got three pages done!” And it’s just like… just do it! (laughs) Don’t worry about it so much. Don’t expect perfection and don’t demand perfection. Just express yourself and put it out there, and then do it again, and do it again, and do it again. And that’s how you’re gonna learn. That’s how you’re gonna make a comic that you’re really proud of. Or make a comic that really surprises you or takes you someplace that you didn’t anticipate it was gonna take you. You have to give yourself the freedom to make a mistake. And to screw something up. And to try something that you’ve never tried before and fail at it. And that’s cliché, like I said, but that’s how you learn. That’s how you develop. That’s how you figure out what you wanna do and how you wanna do it. And if you don’t give yourself that ability, you’re gonna end up being one of those cartoonists who have been working on their 700-page debut memoir graphic novel, and they’ve been on page four for the past 18 months or whatever. Because it’s too much. So I guess it was growing up in punk that gave me that sort of attitude of “it doesn’t need to be perfect,” as long as it gets the point across to somebody, I’m happy. You know? I don’t need to be Rembrandt in order to tell a story. And that’s the thing about comics, too, is… Rembrandt would probably be a pretty shitty cartoonist. Not only do you not need to be able to draw technically well to be a cartoonist, but I actually would say that, in most cases, being able to draw super technically well is probably a hindrance to being an effective cartoonist. Because cartooning is about stripping things down, and it’s about simplifying things, and it’s about getting your point across efficiently, and sometimes I think knowing where every bone in the human face is when you try to draw a face in a cartoon or a comic, it doesn’t help really at all. It doesn’t help you make a good comic. It can kind of make you stub your toe on a lot of things along the way.

SG: Yeah. I think this is something that I not only see resonate in your work, but I know Lynda Barry talks about a lot, and what matters—or what’s so magical about comics—is the power they have to bring things alive.

JP: Mhmm.

SG: And none of that has to do with how realistic or good the art looks. It has to do with this really magical quality about it.

JP: Absolutely. It’s totally true. Totally true.

SG: Yeah. I think letting go of that idea of perfection has been really helpful to me as I’ve been working, and I’ve gotten from a lot of it from Lynda Barry, and I have gotten a lot of it from you, too, and reading your work. So thank you (laughs) for the inspiration.

JP: Well, one thing that I always tell myself, too is… 'cuz I can get hung up on stuff. You know? And when I read somebody else's comics, it is the imperfections, like the little flaws or the little goofs or the little slip-ups or the way the lettering is a little bit sloppy for a few words… and then they pick themselves up and get back, you know? Those are the things that I love about comics. Those are the things that are kind of endearing and charming and interesting about comics. And you don't wanna suck all the life out of your comic. And that's what I always tell myself when I start to get too hung up on stuff… "These are the kinds of things I appreciate in other people's work! So don't get so hard on yourself with your own work, because other people are gonna appreciate these little bits of humanity that show through." You know? When it comes down to it, it's just a human hand holding a stick. And making marks, right? You know? It's crazy. It's like a monkey with a charcoal twig from the fire or something. And it's just kind of amazing. The whole thing is kind of amazing that we can do it. Those are the kinds of things that bring character and charm and enjoyment when I look at other people's work, so let those things come through in your own work sometimes, and people will pick up on that in a positive way, you know?

SG: Yeah. Absolutely. I love what you said: "it's a human hand holding a stick." I wrote that down in all caps.

JP: (laughs)

SG: But that's exactly what it is. It's the mark of a human hand. It's like a footprint. You know? And that's something I love so much about looking at Lynda Barry's stuff: the tactility of it. You know? Her collage, her handwriting. You can see—and this is something that is obviously not exclusive to her work—but you can see where the artist's hand has been. And I think that's a really magical quality, too, because it adds to the idea that reading something is sitting down with its writer and having a conversation with them, you know?

JP: That was enormous for me. In fact, when I was making comics—and like I said, I was making zines and stuff—they were more like art and poetry zines and punk rock zines where I would interview bands and stuff, and [it was] kind of like a catch-all, and it was when I discovered Julie Doucet's very early *Dirty Plotte* when they were self-published and they were little tiny zines, like four by four inches or four by five inches or something like that, and that was the thing that really struck me. Because all the zines and publishing that I'd done, besides those early things when I was young, like *Hogarth the Barbarian* or whatever, what I was doing was… I had creative friends, and once you get locked into the zine network, there are people who will send you submissions and stuff. So I was collecting work from all over from different people and assembling these zines and making a new issue of *Cehsoikoe* and it included stuff from this person, and that person and I had some stuff in it, but it was ninety percent contributors and stuff like that, and when I got those first early *Dirty Plotte*s in the mail… [this] seems really obvious, but that's exactly what you said what struck me—"this is

her!" Right? It's so personal! Everything. And she uses a lot of collage and stuff, the classic zine thing, but it was like, even those had this distinct fingerprint of her personal aesthetic vision to it. And that's why I started *King-Cat*. 'Cuz I wanted to have something like that… it would be my own work, and it would be whatever I wanted it to be at the time, and I wanted to do something that was so really deeply personal, the way I felt *Dirty Plotte* was.

SG: Yeah.

JP: The same thing you said about Lynda Barry—everything that she touches has that energy that only she has that comes through in it. And that was my inspiration to start *King-Cat*, was that kind of thinking.

SG: Yeah. That's amazing. Wow. Let it be known that just like Julie Doucet and Lynda Barry inspired you, you have inspired me so…

JP: Aww. Well, thank you. That's good. I mean, that makes me feel good, so…

SG: Absolutely. Wow, we are barreling through these questions. I think we've hit a lot of good ground. I feel very happy and good about what we've talked about, and I don't wanna hold you for too much longer. I have a couple more fun questions if you don't mind.

JP: Sure.

SG: As if these others haven't been fun. Here's one. What does your current workspace look like? And do you have favorite places that you go to to make your comics?

JP: Well… I have a spare bedroom in our house, and it's a complete disaster.

SG: Great.

JP: Well, I mean part of the thing is I run my distro, too. So I have, like, 800 books in stock, so I—like, I'm sitting here right now and looking. There's an old metal desk that has my laptop on it, and I've got a bunch of shelves of CDs, and the rest of it… I've got a little tiny drafting table that has a nine by twelve open area dug out of it, and the rest of it is stacked with paper and books and stuff, where I draw. And the rest of it is stacks of boxes of books, and I've got nine shelves of people's zines. (laughs) Like, boxes with people's zines. And stacks of books. And magazines everywhere… it's total chaos. It's totally nuts. I'm not even gonna say I like it that way. I probably would prefer for it to be more organized, but it's just—there's too much stuff going on in my brain at any given time nowadays, I can't keep up with stuff. But I have my little drawing table. I bought it when I was, like, 20 years old. I think I bought it right when I started *King-Cat*. I think I probably drew the first issue on it, and it's still the same one. I

mean, that was one of my favorite things about making comics versus being a painter: it's cheap to make comics. You buy pencils, you buy pens, I draw on laser paper from Office Max or whatever… and it's like 18 dollars for a ream. So that's 900 sheets, and I cut them in half. So when I draw *King-Cat* it's drawn that exact size. I don't draw bigger or anything. So I get a thousand pages of comics for 18 dollars-worth of paper.

SG: That's the way to do it.

JP: Yeah! And that's the punk rock thing, too. I think part of it was, I loved that you could take a receipt from the grocery store and a ballpoint pen and turn the receipt over and draw a comic on it. You didn't have to buy really expensive materials. Yeah. So my work area's kind of a mess, but I do everything out of here.

SG: I'm right there with you. I had been doing some reading earlier in the year about supplies. I was just curious, like, "I wonder what people work with?" and people were talking about the really expensive Strathmore boards and really fancy pens, and I was like, "Holy moly!" [so] I went to Wal-Mart and I bought cardstock for five dollars, and I was like, "This works!"

JP: Yeah. That'll work for you. I mean, the first 20 or 25 issues of *King-Cat*, my dad—he had these notepads in his drawer in his home office that were just 5.5 x 8.5 sheets with that rubber at the top so you could pull off a sheet, and it had a little stock drawing of a feather, a quill and an ink well, and it said, "From the desk of Charles Porcellino" … that he would write little notes on. That was 5.5 x 8.5, that was exactly the size of the *King-Cat* page. And so the first 20 issues or so, I just used those pads of paper. And I would peel off the sheet and I would turn it over and draw on the back. And a lot of them, even those early issues, you could sometimes see the ink where it said, "from the desk of Charles Porcellino," where it bled through, so you'd see it backwards, behind the art.

SG: That's cool.

JP: I've drawn a couple things on nice Bristol board and stuff. And when I do commission work for people, and they're paying me money and I'm trying to do something really nice for someone, I'll pull out the Bristol board, but I much prefer to just draw on laser paper. It feels really comfortable to me, and I like the way the line moves on it. It's really smooth. That's what I found that works for me.

SG: It's a lot less intimidating to work on cheaper paper. And I like what you said about the receipt, too, because again that's what's so magical—you can draw a comic on any surface and it'll come alive the exact same way.

JP: Yup.

SG: Which is great and also convenient.

JP: Sure. And if you know Lynda Barry, you'll know that she famously uses those yellow legal pads to draw on.

SG: Totally, yeah.

JP: Because she's too afraid of ruining a nice piece of paper. So that's a good trick. I always kinda got a kick out of it. I got a kick out of spending 18 dollars and getting a thousand—I mean, a thousand pages of comics for me is like 10 years-worth of comics. Or more. You know? I kind of get a personal kick out of that kind of thing. It's just simplifying things to this basic rudimentary kind of way of expressing yourself.

SG: Absolutely. I think I've got just one more question for you, and it's loosely related and it's extra fun. I am on the hunt—I've been on the hunt for a while—for music recommendations. So I'd like to get some from you, but also I'm curious: do you listen to anything while you work? Do you listen to music, podcasts, TV…?

JP: Well, it's—yeah, there's a story. I used to listen to music all the time when I was drawing. I love music. I was a musician 'til I just couldn't do it anymore—music is a huge part of my life. I think about music probably more than I think about comics. What I found was that, at a certain point, I couldn't listen… so here's the way that it works for me now. I can't listen to music when I'm writing, because it throws off—I can't have some other rhythm going on in the background when I'm trying to create some kind of rhythmic work on the page. If that makes sense. And especially for me, the way I approach the writing in my work is akin to writing poetry, so I'm very hyper-aware of the meter of things and the rhythm of things and the way things flow, and the pacing of my comics, and so to have some other kind of thing in the background that's running counter to what I'm trying to do on the page, just messes my brain up. I can't listen to music while I'm writing, and when I'm penciling the pages, I don't listen to music either because [it's] kind of the same thing—the way I work is I write in notebooks, and I'll edit and revise things and I'll tweak things and change things until I get to a point where I feel like I'm ready to start drawing. Different cartoonists have very different, very wide approaches to it, but that's how I do it, but once I actually sit down and start drawing on the comics page, that's when a lot of that meter and stuff gets really fine-tuned, because as a text it feels one way, but then when you sit down and start drawing and start putting panels in and drawings and images and word balloons and stuff… that kind of script that I've developed needs to be opened to adapting to whatever's happening on the page. The only time I listen to music when I'm working is when I'm just inking.

SG: Yeah.

JP: But I used to listen to music constantly. And then it just became—either my brain became too uptight and wired, but I also became more focused on those kinda things I was talking about, the rhythm of it, and tweaking things to make some kind of aesthetic statement, that I needed to be able to focus just really single-mindedly on that. And podcasts? I don't know how people listen to podcasts. 'Cuz I can't pay attention to two things at once. I can't just sit and stare at a computer while it's playing a podcast or whatever. I need to be doing other stuff. And so I'm constantly, like, "I haven't been paying attention for ten minutes!" and so I rewind it or whatever you call it and start listening again, and I—"Dammit! I stopped listening!" You know? I can't do two things at once very well anymore.

SG: Yeah. Yeah.

JP: But a lot of my friends [can]. They're always like, "what's a good movie to put on a while I draw?" and I'm like, "What are you talking about?" It's so foreign to me. But a lot of people do it.

SG: Yeah. Well, thanks. I was just curious about that one. It's something that's always fascinated me. Just wondering how other people do it. 'Cuz I have my own system, too. You know. And it's just funny how our brains react and respond.

JP: Yeah, and like I said, for me it's changed. It's evolved over the years. When I was a painter, I needed to have music. I'd have a big canvas, and I'd have paint out on a pallet, and I'd be slingin' paint and brushes and stuff, and having the music going in the background would really give me energy you that I could put into that work or whatever. But comics is—I have a really different approach to it.

SG: Totally. Yeah. The way it works for me is—I can listen to music while I work, but it absolutely has to be music that reminds me in some way of whatever comic I'm working on—the mood of the song has to fit the comic, and that helps me, but it's gotta match. So I have a playlist where I keep all of my comic songs.

JP: Oh, yeah! When I was doing a book called *Perfect Example*, it was originally two issues of *King-Cat* that got published as a book, and I drew that ten years after the stuff that happened—you know, the events happened—and I remember when I was working on that, all I listened to was music that I listened to ten years prior. I just pulled out all my old records, and I just listened to that stuff nonstop, for exactly that reason. Just to bring back… for me, music has such an indelible connection to times and places, and so bringing back all that music and re-immersing myself in it really brought me back emotionally back to that time I was trying to write about, so… but that was also a long time ago, so…

SG: Yeah. Absolutely. Well, do you have any recommendations for me? Any bands or albums that you've really been into lately?

JP: I'm one of those people that like mostly listens to old music now, so like…

SG: Oh, that's all right. That's good. Everything's good.

JP: The one thing that I discovered that I had no idea about… I really love country music. I go up to about 1995. In fact, a friend of mine and I who are both really into country music, we did this game a couple months ago where we looked at the Billboard Top #1 country hits, and we went through the list until we got to… what was the last Billboard #1 that we wouldn't be embarrassed to put on at a party?

SG: (laughs) Yeah.

JP: For me it was "Tall, Tall Trees" by Alan Jackson, which I think hit #1 in December of '94?

SG: Uh-huh. That's cuttin' it.

JP: There's this country singer named Leona Williams. And she's still active and singing now. She's married to Merle Haggard. Her early stuff, like a lot of singers at the time… it's very indebted to Loretta Lynn, but she really quickly found her own voice. And her work is super obscure; you never find people talking about her. In fact, like, until a couple years ago, none of her music had ever been re-released on DVD or digitally or anything. There's a really good record label from Germany called Bear Family, and they put out a three-disc set of her, spanning her whole career. And when I heard that, I was just like, "I can't believe that I never heard this singer before." Because it's so good. I really like Leona Williams. I have a tendency to revisit things from my past, and right now I'm revisiting The Velvet Underground, who are super influential to me. And that's really fun. I'm looking here at my current stack. Another guy I really like recently, that I kind of had always known about but didn't realize how much I liked him, is this guy named Tony Joe White. He was popular in [the] late 60's, early 70's, and I think his most popular song was called "Polk Salad Annie." But he played what he called "swamp rock."

SG: (laughs) Oh, yeah.

JP: It's really southern and really super funky and kinda gritty. But he's a great writer. I'll leave it at that.

SG: Yeah. I really like the sound of swamp rock.

JP: Yes! And his first bunch of albums are just great. Tony Joe White, I would recommend.

SG: I'll check him out. Thank you.

JP: Yeah.

SG: John, this was so great. Are there any final thoughts, any questions that you wish I would have asked you?

JP: (laughs) My brain doesn't think that way.

SG: Okay, that's fine. I just wanted to check.

JP: I think those were all really great questions. It was really interesting.

SG: Yeah!

JP: Yeah. Sounds like a kindred spirit, so… Do you have a website or something, or some way to see your work online? Or if you have some zines or something, I'd love to see 'em.

SG: Yeah! Absolutely. I'd love to share them with you. I'm still discovering how to print and distribute. I'm working on a website right now, so when I hang up here, I'll send you the link. It barely has anything on it right now.

JP: That's fine.

SG: Work-in-progress. So yeah, I'd love to share. And once I get things printed, I would love to send a copy your way, if that's—

JP: Yeah, for sure.

SG: —something you're open to.

JP: Of course.

SG: Yeah!

JP: And if you come out to CAKE or something, introduce yourself. It'd be nice to meet you.

SG: Yeah. A hundred percent.

JP: Okay! If you think of anything else that I can answer quick in an email, just drop me a line.

SG: Awesome. Thank you so much.

JP: Well, good luck with your project.

SG: Thanks. This has meant a lot to me.

JP: Good. I'm happy to have done it.

SG: Yeah. Well, enjoy the rest of your Friday, and enjoy your hiking and your guitar playing this weekend.

JP: All right. I'll talk to you later.

SG: All right. Bye, John.

JP: Bye.